10¢

# TEN DETECTIVE ACES

10 STORIES 10¢

## LEAGUE OF THE DAMNED

"Capt. Murdock" Novelet

By CARL McK. SAUNDERS

+

## SKELETON'S SNARE

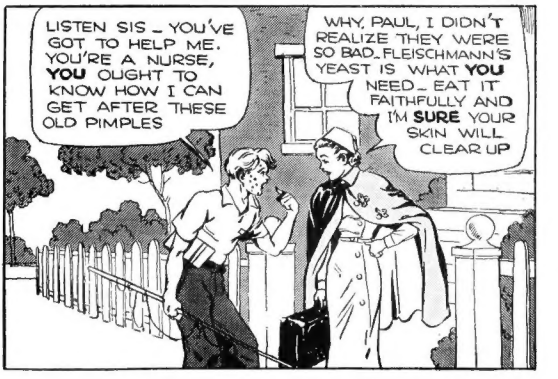
"Moon Man" Novelet

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

And Eight Other Complete Detective Aces

THE GIRLS WERE GIVING PAUL THE "GO-BY" UNTIL—

BUT PAUL — DORA SAID SHE WAS GOING TO ASK YOU, I HEARD HER
YES — AND THEN SHE SAID YOU HAD HICKIES — WHAT ARE HICKIES PAUL?
WELL I'LL BE JIGGERED —
SO **THAT'S** WHY I'VE BEEN SITTING AROUND WITH ONLY MYSELF FOR COMPANY!


LISTEN SIS — YOU'VE GOT TO HELP ME. YOU'RE A NURSE, **YOU** OUGHT TO KNOW HOW I CAN GET AFTER THESE OLD PIMPLES
WHY, PAUL, I DIDN'T REALIZE THEY WERE SO BAD. FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST IS WHAT **YOU** NEED — EAT IT FAITHFULLY AND I'M **SURE** YOUR SKIN WILL CLEAR UP

LATER
ATTA BOY — PAUL SURE IS ALL THE RAGE AROUND HERE THESE DAYS
WELL — HE'S CERTAINLY A DIFFERENT LOOKING BOY SINCE HE GOT RID OF THOSE UGLY HICKIES

*—clears the skin*

**by clearing skin irritants out of the blood**

**Don't let Adolescent Pimples put a stop to YOUR good times**

YOUNG PEOPLE are often plagued by unsightly pimples after the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or longer.

Important glands develop at this time, and final growth takes place causing disturbances in the body. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin —and pimples break out!

Fleischmann's fresh Yeast clears these skin irritants out of the blood. Then, the pimples go. Eat 3 cakes *daily* —one about ½ hour before meals —plain, or dissolved in a little water—until your skin clears. Start today!

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# THIS MAN'S IDEA IS A GOD-SEND TO FOLKS WHO NEED MONEY

*By* P. H. GRAHAM

This is a true story. I know this man personally. I know of many folks he has helped. I know of widows with children to support who thank him for their incomes. I know of men who lost their jobs, but are now making more money than ever before. I can tell you of men and women who live better because of the opportunity this man gives them to add to their incomes. Yes, I know literally hundreds of folks to whom this man's idea of doing business has been a God-send.

## Do You Need Money?

Perhaps you, too, are in urgent need of money to meet pressing bills. You may have some spare time you want to turn into cash. Then you will want to write this man at once. There will be no obligation on your part. He will write and tell you about a wonderful plan he has for helping you.

He is President of a large million-dollar manufacturing company. He does business in every section of the country—in your very locality. He started some years ago with an idea. It was this: He said, "I'll help worthy people who are in need of money. My proven business-building plans shall be given to the deserving so they, too, can have money." He prospered. His business became most tremendously successful following these practical "Golden Rule" plans. And today it is still growing. Right now he needs 300 men and women in all parts of the country. He needs someone in your section to help handle the business there. To everyone who accepts his offer he guarantees a fair, square deal and an amazing opportunity to make as high as $42.50 in a week in this pleasant dignified manner.

## Have Nice Year 'Round Earnings

There is really nothing difficult about this plan. Any man or woman with some spare time can start making money immediately. Even right in your own locality you can have money coming in every week. I sincerely ask you to fill out and mail the coupon. You don't obligate yourself or risk any money. You will receive complete details by return mail. You have an opportunity to start right away and have the money you need coming in. It will certainly pay you to give this a trial. Better sit down and write your name and address on the coupon or a penny postcard and mail it to the following address at once.

**ALBERT MILLS, President**
8609 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

**ALBERT MILLS, President**
**8609 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.**

I have some time I can spare and need extra money. Without obligation, please tell me about your plan for helping me.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

(This offer not good outside the U.S.)

# TEN DETECTIVE ACES

A. A. WYN, Editor — HARRY WIDMER, Managing Editor

Vol. XXVII — SEPTEMBER, 1936 — No. 3

## Ten Complete, Different Stories — No Serials!

1. SKELETON SNARE ("Moon Man" Novelet) . Frederick C. Davis 8
*With his dying breath, a blackmail victim names the notorious Moon Man as his murderer.*

2. DEATH'S ICE HOUSE . . . . . Paul Chadwick 35
*Beautiful Ellen Lansing was a private dick's link to a Tommy-gun guarded ice house, where mystery and crooked politics were frozen in one cube of death.*

3. CRIME DOES NOT PLAY ("Dizzy Duo" Yarn) . Joe Archibald 46
*Snooty Piper thought those poisoned citizens had stronger constitutions t' 'n the one drawn up in '76.*

4. LEAGUE OF THE DAMNED ("Capt. Murdock" Novelet) Carl McK. Saunders 54
*Detective Captain Murdock made the willowy Sylvia Tucker buy a hat she did not want—to find the hideout of the murder master who was cutting down G-man ranks.*

5. JOY-RIDE SNATCH . . . . Ralph Powers 73
*The young government agent played tag with Fate, when he baited an unknown killer who had a whim for torturing—and a flair for getting away with it.*

6. SUICIDE BRACELETS . . . . . Bob Gordon 81
*A rookie cop used his own handcuffs to snare himself with doom's boomerang.*

7. BORROWED EVIDENCE (True Crime Story) . . Cliff Howe 91
*Clues That Caught Criminals No. 33.*

8. THE GHOST REPORTER (Mystery-Action Novelet) Norman A. Daniels 93
*Rusty Rankin, redheaded newshawk, knew he would have to make himself a bullet target, if he were to discover the true colors of the fascinating but baffling girl he knew as Rita.*

9. MURDER'S RED NAILS . . . . . Phil Richards 109
*When the Grim Reaper jeered from a sophisticated woman's finger-nails, a keen-eyed sleuth scoffed at laboratory clues.*

THE OCTOBER LINE-UP OF TEN DETECTIVE ACES . . 111

10. BULLET-BATTLE TREASURE . . Emile C. Tepperman 112
*Marty Quade was quick to grab up the gunpowder-gauntlet tossed by the Devil himself, who was chuckling at the trigger of a sharpshooter's setup.*

*Cover by Wm. E. Luberoff*

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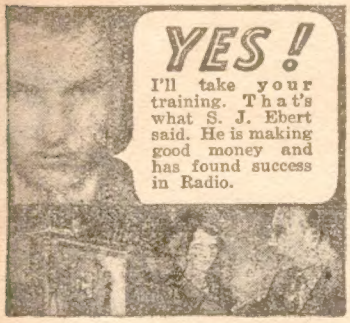
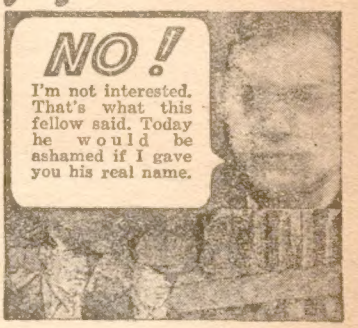
# Read what happened to these two men when I said:



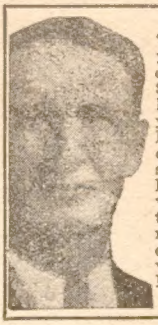




# I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

These two fellows had the same chance. Each clipped and sent me a coupon, like the one in this ad. They got my book on Radio's opportunities.

S. J. Ebert, 104-B Quadrangle, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, saw that Radio offered him a real chance. He enrolled. The other fellow, whom we will call John Doe, wrote that he wasn't interested. He was just one of those fellows who wants a better job, better pay, but never does anything about it. One of the many who spend their lives in a low-pay, no-future job, because they haven't the ambition, the determination, the action it takes to succeed.

But read what S. J. Ebert wrote me and remember that John Doe had the same chance: "Upon graduation I accepted a job as serviceman, and within three weeks was made Service Manager. This job paid me $40 to $50 a week compared with $18 I earned in a shoe factory before. Eight months later I went with station KWCR as operator. From there I went to KTNT. Now I am Radio Engineer with WSUI. I certainly recommend the N. R. I. to all interested in the greatest field of all, Radio."



"I WANT TO HELP you. If you are earning less than $35 a week I believe I can raise your pay. However, I will let you decide that. Let me show you what I have done for others, what I am prepared to do for you. Get my book, read it over, and decide one way or another." J. E. Smith.

### Get ready for Jobs like these. Many Radio Experts make $30, $50, $75 a week

Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time Radio servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full time or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men who have taken N.R.I. Training are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

### Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send you special Radio equipment and show you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important Radio principles. My training gives you valuable, practical experience while learning.

### Get My Free 64-Page Book Now

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to anyone over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Training for Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

**J. E. SMITH, President**
**National Radio Institute, Dept. 6JA8**
**Washington, D. C.**

MAIL THIS NOW

**FOR FREE BOOK OF FACTS ABOUT RADIO**

**J. E. SMITH, President**
**National Radio Institute, Dept. 6JA8**
**Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly)

NAME ..... AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE.....

# Thousands Learn Music World's Easiest Way!

## No Expensive Teachers
## No Bothersome Scales
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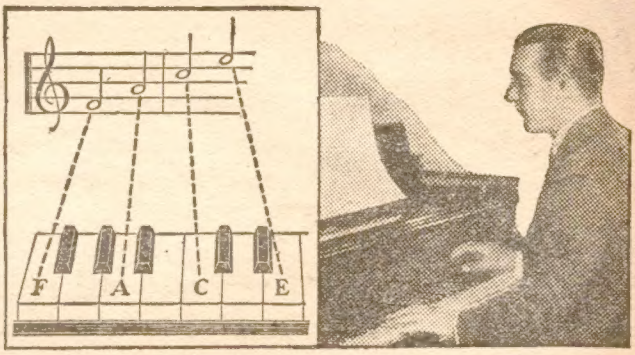
## ALL BEGINNERS LEARN REAL MUSIC FROM THE START




## New Friends... Good Times... Popularity Come Quickly

If you've always had the notion that learning music requires years of practice and expensive teachers get ready now to change your mind. Thousands of men and women in all walks of life have learned to play their favorite instruments—have won new friends—this quick, modern, easy as A-B-C way.

You, too, can learn to play—to entertain others—to pep up any party—just as these thousands of others are doing. And best of all you can do this without the expense of a private teacher—right in your own home and in a much shorter time.

### It Seemed So Strange to Hear Her Play

We knew she had never taken a lesson—so everyone laughed when she sat down at the piano. But she played with such soul fire that everyone swayed forward, tense, listening. When the last chord vanished like an echo—we were astonished and contrite. "We can't believe you never had a teacher," we exclaimed! And then she told us about this new, easy way to learn music at home, without a teacher.

### You Don't Need to Be Talented

Don't get the idea that you have to be a musical genius—or need previous musical training. Not at all. And unlike the old fashioned way, with this modern method you don't have to spend hours and hours playing monotonous scales and humdrum finger exercises.

You start right in learning real little tunes. Gradually you master more and more difficult ones until — sooner than you ever expected — you find yourself entertaining your friends—playing at parties—and having the best times you ever had.

### Easy As A-B-C

The success of this U. S. School method of musical instruction is due to two things. One is the fact that it makes everything so simple — so crystal clear — so easy to understand. First it *tells* you how to do a thing. Then it *shows* you in pictures how to do it. Then you do it yourself and *hear* it. What could be simpler?

The second reason for the success of this system is that it is so fascinating. Learning music this way is like playing a game. Practicing becomes real fun instead of a bore as it used to be with the old way.

### Free Booklet and Demonstration Lesson

In order to show how easy—how simple—how pleasant this course is, the U. S. School of Music has prepared for you a free Demonstration Lesson and Explanatory Booklet. No matter what instrument you select to play, the Free Demonstration Lesson and Booklet will show you at once the amazingly simple principles around which this method is built. And how it will enable you to become a popular musician in a surprisingly short time—at a cost of only a few cents a day.

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|---|---|
| Piano | Guitar |
| Violin | Saxophone |
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| Cornet | Ukulele |
| Trombone | Harp |
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| Flute | 'Cello |

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Harmony and Composition
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If you really want to learn music—if you want to win new popularity—if you want to enjoy musical good times galore — fill in and mail the coupon below. Don't delay — act at once. You'll not be obligated in any way. U. S. School of Music, 4349 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

**Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.**

*Thirty-Eighth Year (Established 1898)*

**U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC**
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Please send me your free book, "How You Can Master Music in Your Own Home," with inspiring message by Dr. Frank Crane, Free Demonstration Lesson and particulars of your easy payment plan. I am interested in the following course:

Have you
..... Instrument? .....

Name .....

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### —A Great Industry with a Great Future

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### —A Field with a Future

This course has meant advancement to hundreds of ambitious men, mechanics, draftsmen, blacksmiths, foundrymen, patternmakers, apprentices, and mechanical engineers—men who wanted to get ahead and to earn more money. You will find, as they have found, that enrolling for an I. C. S. Course is an investment in a Bigger Future.

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**SEND COUPON WHILE LOW PRICES HOLD**

Remington Rand, Inc., Dept. 137-9
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Please tell me how I can get a new Remington Noiseless Portable typewriter, plus FREE Typing Course and carrying case, for only 10c a day. Also send me new illustrated catalogue.

Name_____

Address_____

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**No Money Down—Actual Crime Cases—**
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**Now FREE**

**A. R. Patterson, Civil Service Expert**
**PATTERSON SCHOOL, 239 Case Bldg., Rochester, N. Y.**
Please send me, without obligation, your free book "How to Secure a Government Position."

Name .....

Address .....

# *Is your name here? . . .*

BELOW is a list of surnames of some of the most distinguished American families. Our research staff has completed preparation of manuscripts dealing with the history of each of these families. If your name is listed, you should have a copy of your manuscript. You will find it not only of keen interest, but a source of pride and satisfaction to yourself and your kin.

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Each manuscript is a GENEALOGICAL and HISTORICAL sketch of the family from medieval times, showing its origin and growth, its place among the gentry in Great Britain or on the Continent, its part in the founding and development of America, and its achievements in this country. The derivation of the name itself is traced; family traits and characteristics are brought out; and genealogical data are set forth. Bound as it is in an attractive gray cover, the manuscript may be filed among your family records or other important documents. It will serve as background material for your immediate family history and will be valuable as a basis for the genealogy of future generations.

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# Skeleton Snare

## *By Frederick C. Davis*

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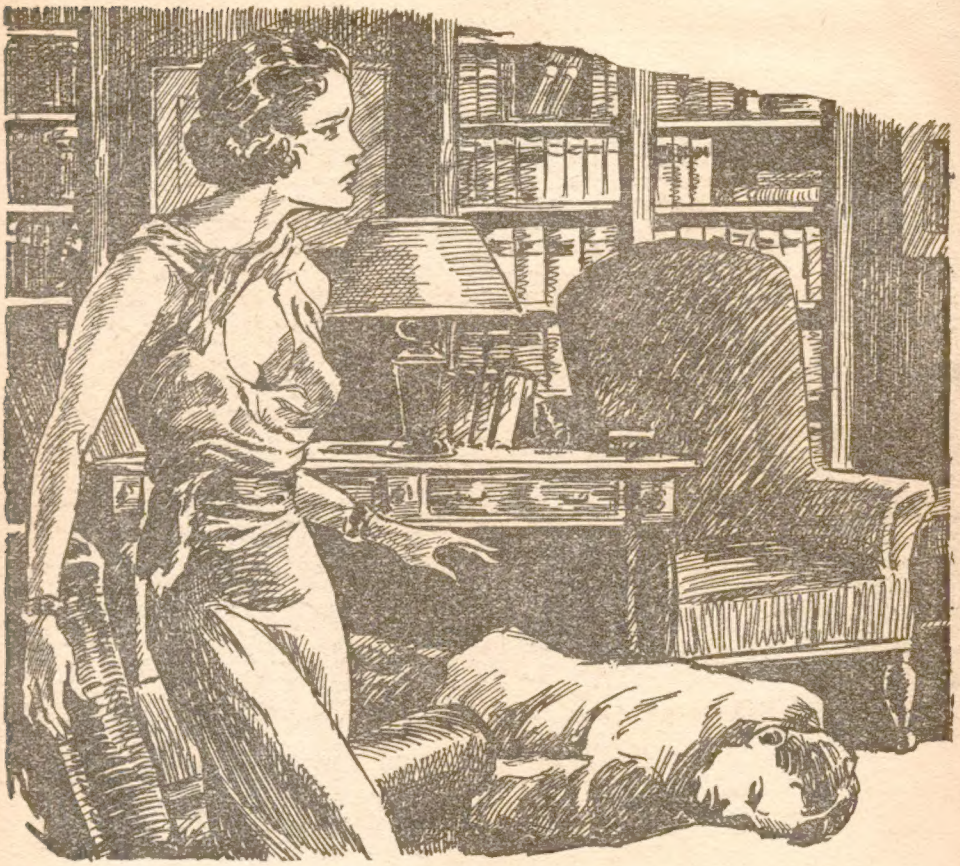

*Death stilled the lips of a blackmail victim who was about to rip open a city-wide money scandal. But before that man died he named the notorious Moon Man as his murderer. Yet, even the Moon Man's deadliest enemy had never accused him of cowardly extortion.*

### CHAPTER I

### The Magic Mask

MOVING with ghostly silence, the black figure drifted across the gloomy court. A score of lighted windows looked down into the hollow between the buildings like gleaming eyes, but the phantom remained unseen. It dissolved into the darkness of a doorway, this living shadow in the midnight hush —a man garbed in flowing black robe, whose head was a sphere of silver.

White shafts from the rooms above slanted over him while his gloved hand tested a skeleton key in the lock. Though his shining, globular mask made him seem an unearthly creature without eyes, he could see clearly through the sheen of the glass that completely hid his features.

"Moon Man" Novelet

*He bounded to the French doors—into clutching arms—*

He was seeking illegal entrance into a house that had once been among the richest in Great City, which was still staidly fashionable. The lock yielded to his skilled fingers. At once he slipped into the thicker darkness inside.

His black robe fluttered as he crossed a furnace room. Passing a glowing water-heater, he shouldered into the basement hallway. Leveling a revolver, he darted up a flight of stairs. He paused, hearing the voices of two men clashing in a closed room—voices edged with anger. He glided through the doorway of the adjacent room, then hesitated again. He overheard a ringing epithet, a wrathful outburst:

"Damned if I'll submit to being bled! I'm calling the police! I'll see you rot in prison before I'll pay—"

A shot blasted, muffled in the closed room. Immediately a pained moan followed, then a crunching thud. Heels beat the floor rapidly A door snapped open, slammed shut. The running footfalls receded along the hall. Some one was making a desperately rapid escape.

The black-robed figure darted to the hallway, silver head glimmering. He had been quick, but not quick enough to catch a glimpse of the fleeing man. Now there

was no sound. A long breath soughing within his spherical mask, the dark figure turned back. His gloved hand seized the knob of the door connecting this lightless room with that in which the shot had been fired. He jerked it open.

A white-headed man lay sprawled before him. The victim of the bullet had pitched to the rug in the glare of a table lamp. His lax face was blotted with crimson from a black hole in the center of his forehead. His one blue-veined hand had gone limp on the telephone. His fall had toppled a vase of flowers from the table. The blooms and the water had spilled upon him. Scattered around him, as though they had been flung angrily to the floor, were many banknotes of high denomination.

A glance told the robed intruder that the currency must total a small fortune. Sight of it galvanized him. He darted forward, stooped beside the corpse. His black-gloved hands snatched up the money. Though some of the banknotes were wet, a few spotted with scarlet, this gave him no hesitation. But a noise made him freeze at his task—a footstep.

"Mr. Henshaw!" a voice called anxiously. "Mr. Henshaw, sir!"

The masked man straightened with a gasp, forced by the alarm to leave much of the money on the floor. His gloved left hand clamped hard on the wad he had picked up. His right pointed his revolver at the open hallway door. Just beyond the sill a figure appeared, jerked to a stop in the line of fire. The muffled voice of the robed prowler commanded:

"Stay where you are! Raise your hands!"

The newcomer obeyed with fearful alacrity. He was lean and bald. Beneath his gaping bathrobe he was wearing a long nightshirt. His large feet were encased in carpet slippers. His cadaverous face went white with dismay. He gulped, unable to force a single sound from his numb lips, as he stared at the spectral black figure with the spherical head.

The robed man advanced. He gripped the servant's arm, pulled him into the murder room. He bounded into the hallway, pulling the door shut. Standing alone beside the victim of murder, the bald servant heard swift, retreating footfalls. Half a moment later a door low in the house thumped shut. In awesome silence, the butler stared into the air from which the black-robed figure had vanished. At last he whispered a name:

"The Moon Man!"

A POLICE car was rolling along the street lined with old-fashioned brownstone dwellings. Its radio was, as always, tuned to the wave-length of the headquarters broadcasting station. The steely-eyed man at the wheel was a grizzled veteran of the force whose complete devotion to his duties never flagged. He was gnawing thoughtfully on an unlighted cigar, grimly silent. He was the ace sleuth of the Great City plainclothes division, Gilbert McEwen.

Beside him, clean-cut and tastefully tailored, sat Stephen Thatcher, detective sergeant, son of the chief of police, and fiancé of McEwen's daughter Sue.

They had spent a long night in their offices working on routine details. They were weary and on their way home. But all thought of rest vanished instantly from Gil McEwen's mind when an announcement rasped out of the radio:

"Calling cars Four-Five and Three-Six! Forty-Five and Thirty-Six. Go at once to Ninety-Two Bolivar Street. Signals Thirty and Fifty. Calling cars—"

"By damn!" McEwen blurted. He knew that 92 Bolivar Street was the home of Homer Henshaw, a man whose once wealthy family had laid the very cornerstone of exclusive, cultured society in Great City. Signal Thirty was itself alarming, because it mean a crime of violence, but coupled with the Henshaw address it was startling.

Even more electrifying was Signal Fifty, a code of McEwen's own devising. It flashed: "The Moon Man has been spotted!" It spurred the dogged McEwen into a desperately swift response. He gripped the wheel in corded hands, jammed the accelerator pedal to its limit, sent the car leaping.

"By damn, it can't be!" he ground out. "Somebody's mistaken. The Moon Man

couldn't be operating tonight. He hasn't got his robe and mask. They're locked in the chief's safe in headquarters. But if he's there—we're close enough to grab him before he gets out of the house!"

The wind of the car's speed whipped across Steve Thatcher's widened eyes. He looked amazed into the next block, where the well-known Henshaw home was situated—McEwen's destination, the spot where the most notorious criminal in Great City had been reported seen. Thatcher appreciated more keenly than anyone else McEwen's inflexible determination to bag the Moon Man. The leather-skinned veteran's vow to bring the notorious crook to justice had become almost an obsession. Driven by that relentless determination, his teeth crushed into his cigar, McEwen hurled the car to the curb of the Henshaw home.

Steve Thatcher, frowning with bewilderment, hurried with McEwen to the entrance. McEwen rapped violently, glancing over his shoulder to see two radio roadsters lurching to a stop in the street. Four patrolmen, answering the broadcast alarm, scattered to the front of the house with drawn service guns. McEwen's pounding on the panel brought a flustered response. The safety chain rattled loose, the door opened, a gaunt white face looked out.

McEwen thrust the servant aside, strode into the study, paused peering down at the dead man. Orders began crackling from his lips. "Watch the doors! Go through this house from top to bottom. Phone for the homicide detail. Signal every prowl car in this section to watch out for the Moon Man. Who gave that alarm?"

The gulping servant answered in a quavering voice: "I did, sir. I'm Brooks, Mr. Henshaw's man. I was sleeping in my room, sir, when I heard the shot. Of course, sir, I got up at once. I came to this door, sir, and saw him in this room —the Moon Man!"

McEwen scowled. "Sure of that? Sure you weren't seeing things? I don't understand how the devil the Moon Man could be here when his robe and mask are—"

"I'm certain, sir—yes, sir!" Brooks blurted. "There could be no mistaking him, sir. His long, black robe and his mask. Just that round, silver head, sir, like a full moon, without any eyes or ears or mouth. But he could see me, and he ordered me—"

"All right!" McEwen cut in gruffly. "You saw the Moon Man. It couldn't have been the Moon Man, but it was!"

Steve Thatcher was gazing shocked at the dead man on the floor. The murder of this highly esteemed member of a fine old family was not only a sensational but a ghastly crime. Even to the hardened McEwen, the murder was revolting. Thatcher watched him stoop, pick up several of the wet banknotes, grimace acidly. He lifted blazing, metallic eyes.

"As filthy a killing as I've ever seen!" the veteran growled. "Murdering a defenseless old man—the most despicable job the Moon Man ever pulled. Not even a sneaking rat of a gunman would care to have this on his soul. This time the Moon Man's got to answer! I've sworn it a thousand times already, Steve, but tonight I mean it more than ever before. I'm never going to stop until I see the Moon Man die in the chair!"

ONE of the prowl-car men stepped to the detective to report: "No sign of him, lieutenant. He probably escaped through the basement door." McEwen nodded grimly. "I expected that!" He crackled orders to the patrolmen to guard the house, then turned suddenly to the door, face set with new purpose. He peered again at Steve Thatcher to say: "I don't understand this, Steve, but I'm going to find the answer damned quick!"

Thatcher anxiously followed McEwen from the house, to the car. McEwen swerved from the curb. His U-turn told Thatcher that McEwen's purpose was taking them back to police headquarters. An intersection flashed past while Thatcher puzzled. He said quietly through the rushing wind:

"This doesn't seem like the Moon Man's work, Gil. An admirable man like Henshaw is not the type the Moon Man picks to rob. He steals only from those

who deserve to lose. What's more, he's not a killer. I feel sure the Moon Man isn't guilty—"

"He's guilty as hell," McEwen snarled, "of more crimes than he'll ever live to suffer for! Don't forget, he's already charged with one murder. He found himself in a tight spot tonight. We know the Moon Man is some one who leads an otherwise respectable life and moves in the best circles. It's possible Henshaw discovered his identity and the Moon Man had to silence him. He'll pay for that!"

"In spite of Brooks' seeing the Moon Man there, Gil," Thatcher protested, "I can't believe—"

"I'm going to find out about his robe and mask," McEwen retorted, "right now!"

He jounced the car to a stop at the headquarters curb. Thatcher strode at his side into the turreted building, up the worn wooden stairs. At once McEwen thrust into the office of Peter Thatcher, the chief. He stepped to the big black safe sitting in the corner. He gripped the handle, attempted to turn it, found it fast.

McEwen was revolving the combination dial when the door opened. Thatcher glanced around to see Detective Sergeant Mark Keanan entering. Keanan was a stocky, florid man of middle age who had built up a long, exemplary record. He was as determined as McEwen to end the criminal career of the Moon Man. His manner quick, he stepped in asking:

"What about the alarm on the Moon Man, Gil? How the devil could he show up when we have his robe and mask locked up in that safe? We know he couldn't possibly have a duplicate."

Intent on his task, McEwen made no answer. He had long ago unearthed the facts about the Moon Man's mask. It had been fashioned of Argus glass by the only plant in the world making this strange product, the St. Gobain factory in France. Ironically, the Moon Man had contrived to obtain it under the name of Gilbert McEwen. And McEwen had made sure that only one such mask existed, knew that the Moon Man's world-wide notoriety rendered it impossible for him to obtain another. The one and only mask of the Moon Man, McEwen had ample reason to believe, was locked up in this safe in the chief's office.

Weeks ago, forcing the Moon Man into a tight corner in the city morgue, McEwen had taken the prize. In order to escape capture, the Moon Man had put his robe and mask on a corpse. He had succeeded in eluding McEwen, but he had lost his regalia. McEwen had seized upon it with grim triumph, knowing that the Moon Man dared not operate without it.

Since that night, he had kept the robe and mask inside these walls of steel. Yet tonight, with uncanny power, according to the servant, Brooks, the Moon Man had appeared. McEwen was seeking the answer to that puzzle now.

Again he gripped the handle of the heavy metal door. This time it yielded. McEwen tugged the safe open. He unlocked the leaf of an inner compartment. Staring, he slowly removed the tooth-gashed cigar from his mouth. Puzzled, Steve Thatcher and Mark Keanan stood at his shoulders. Three widened pairs of eyes looked upon a bundled black robe and a shining sphere of silver.

The Moon Man's regalia was there.

McEwen blurted: "By damn! Was Brooks seeing things? According to what he said, the Moon Man couldn't have been wearing anything but his genuine mask, but here it is! That crook is damned near being a sorcerer, but how could he— Wait!" McEwen's eyes had narrowed to thin gray lines. "Wait!"

McEwen's powerful hands fastened upon the regalia. He examined the mask quickly, gently placed it aside. He unrolled the robe, passed his spatulate fingers across it carefully. "By damn!" rattled out of his throat. He gathered a fistful of the black fabric, squeezed hard. A red drop of liquid fell. He opened his hand and stared at a crimson smear.

"Blood!" he blurted. "Wet! Henshaw's! Do you know what that means? The Moon Man came in here tonight—here, in the chief's office in police headquarters—and got his robe out of that safe. This blood, still wet, proves he was wearing this very robe and mask when he

murdered Henshaw. Then afterward, he had the colossal nerve to come here again and put his regalia back in the safe!"

Steve Thatcher stood speechless. Mark Keanan was staring aghast. McEwen's voice sounded like a file biting into metal.

"It proves more than that! It shows what I've suspected all along. The Moon Man is somebody who's thoroughly familiar with headquarters—somebody who can come and go without being suspected—*a man on this force!*"

Freezing fingers of anxiety closed upon Steve Thatcher's throat. He knew, beyond all doubt, that the Moon Man was not actually guilty of killing Homer Henshaw, but he could not speak. He was certain the Moon Man had really had no part in the episode at the Henshaw house, but he was forced to remain silent.

He did not know who had murdered Henshaw, or who Brooks had seen wearing the robe and mask, but he realized coldly that the Moon Man was trapped by circumstances—that Gil McEwen was closer than ever before to learning the secret of the notorious criminal's identity.

For Detective Sergeant Stephen Thatcher was the real Moon Man.

## CHAPTER II

### MURDER MONEY

MORE perilously than ever before Steve Thatcher faced exposure. His was a secret which he shared with only two others in the world. Long ago the Moon Man had been born of the warm generosity of Steve Thatcher's heart. He had undertaken an undercover career of robbery only in order to help those who must have aid or perish. He stole only ill-gotten gains and distributed every cent of his loot to the needy but this, he knew, could never save him from suffering the full penalty of the law.

Gil McEwen was totally unaware that his avowed foe was his closest friend. He did not dream that his daughter's fiancé was the infamous criminal he had sworn to get. The revelation of the secret, inevitable as it was, Steve Thatcher realized, would break the tough veteran detective.

Stunned by McEwen's discovery, baffled by the mystery of the blood-stained robe, Thatcher almost lost awareness of his surroundings. Fighting down the turmoil in his heart, he saw a blue-shirted patrolman entering. Thatcher recognized him as one assigned to the Telegraph Bureau. The patrolman reported to McEwen:

"Concerning the Henshaw case, lieutenant. There was a call from the Henshaw home just a few minutes before the servant rang in. It came through my switchboard. Nobody answered, but I thought I heard a shot, then a noise like the telephone dropping. Next the servant, Brooks, called. I thought it might be important, sir."

"It's important, all right!" McEwen snapped. "Thanks!" As the patrolman withdrew, he pulled several banknotes from his pocket. They were wet—those he had picked off the floor on which the corpse lay. He examined them intently, his eyes gleaming. Suddenly he looked up. He announced tersely: "Marked!"

Keanan blinked. "Marked?" he echoed. "What does it mean, Gil?"

"It fills out the picture of what happened," McEwen answered. "Evidently the Moon Man is going in for extortion. He must have put his hooks into Homer Henshaw somehow. Tonight he went to Henshaw's place to collect. Henshaw was ready for him. He had this money ready to pay the Moon Man—marked, so it could be traced. Evidently the Moon Man was smart enough to spot it right then and there. He must have thrown the money to the floor . . . . Henshaw, because his trick had failed, must have decided to call headquarters. He did—but the Moon Man silenced him before he could speak!"

Steve Thatcher forced through a dry throat: "That's sheer conjecture, Gil. So far as we know, The Moon Man has never stooped to blackmail. Besides, you're not at all sure it actually was the Moon Man who did this, and not some one who used his mask and robe for a cover. Why—why, Gil, would the real Moon Man de-

liberately sacrifice his regalia by returning it to the chief's safe?"

McEwen snorted grimly. "Everything checks, Steve. The extortion theory accounts for every detail. It must be right. Why did the Moon Man bring back his robe and mask? Listen! He'd just committed a particularly cowardly murder. He was desperate to shield himself. He returned the regalia to make it appear it hadn't been used during the crime—to blow up Brooks' testimony as a witness. That answers your question!"

Thatcher began to insist: "But I still don't believe—"

McEwen cut in: "The Moon Man had to move so fast that he didn't realize he was putting a perfect piece of evidence right into our hands—the fresh blood on the robe. That's absolutely conclusive. It brands him with the murder. That and that alone is enough to send him to the chair!"

Steve Thatcher's fists clenched. "Listen, Gil," he said levelly. "You hate the Moon Man. Your whole life is devoted to destroying his. You welcome everything you can possibly use against him. You can't help that, but in this case I'm positive you're wrong. Beginning right now, I'm hitting this case with everything I've got. I'm going to do my damnedest to prove the Moon Man did not kill Homer Henshaw."

He strode stiffly to the door, hands clubbed, icily determined, feeling Gil McEwen's shrewd, penetrating gaze upon him.

THRUSTING out the street entrance, Thatcher glanced back to see Mark Keanan following. He nodded tightly when Keanan asked: "Going back to the Henshaw place?" The stocky detective piled into Thatcher's roadster beside him. Thatcher turned it directly toward the scene of the murder, staring straight ahead, his jaw clenched. Keanan, searching his set face, said:

"Frankly, Steve, I agree with Gil all the way. Every piece of evidence points to the Moon Man's guilt. Nothing leaves any doubt. That murder grew out of blackmail. Extortion is a low, sneaking, filthy crime and the Moon Man's fully capable of it. I hate the human bloodsucker as much as Gil. I'm going to do my damnedest on this case too, Steve—to send the Moon Man to the death house for it!"

The bitterness ringing in Keanan's tone surprised Thatcher, but he made no reply. He felt overwhelmed with a burning sense of injustice, felt his purpose strengthened. He realized that defending the Moon Man might turn suspicion upon him, but he could not shoulder the blame for a reprehensible double crime which he had not committed. Yet, he knew, his efforts might bring worse than failure—might betray the Moon Man's deadly secret.

Thatcher strode straight to the entrance of the Henshaw home. With Keanan at his heels, he entered the slain man's study to find a routine investigation in progress. The detectives of the homicide squad were photographing the corpse and the room, searching for fingerprints and other clues. Thatcher asked questions, learned they had found nothing that might possibly point to the Moon Man's innocence.

His sharp eyes paused on a memorandum pad on the desk in the corner. A cryptic notation started something clicking in his mind. The pencil scrawl, evidently in the murdered man's handwriting, said: *Q.L., 11:30 p.m.* Thatcher ripped the leaf off, folded it, tucked it in his pocket. He left the room, seeing that patrolmen were on duty at the front and rear doors, then, with Keanan following, descended to the basement level.

The front section, he saw, was a game room containing a ping-pong table. The rear door gave into a dark space housing an old furnace not now in use. The lids of the monkey stove connected with the hot water tank were, however, glowing red. They radiated parching heat into Thatcher's drawn face. He snapped a switch, gazed out the basement entrance through which a murderer had fled.

About to step out he paused, a dry exclamation of satisfaction breaking from

his lips. He reached into a half-filled ash receptacle. From it he lifted a crushed felt hat. It was midnight blue, of an expensive make. The marks of dust on it told Thatcher it had evidently been brushed from the head of the escaping killer by the upper edge of the low door frame. As Keanan came close to inspect it Thatcher's heart speeded exultantly.

"The Moon Man was wearing his mask, not a hat," he said softly. "Strong evidence, Mark, to prove he's innocent! If there are initials—"

At that instant a flat explosion blasted upon Thatcher's ears. Flame fountained out of the gloom from a point startlingly close. With lightning-swift force a bullet struck at the hanging bulb inside the furnace room. Broken glass spattered. The gloom of the court flooded in through the door. Blinded, gripping the vital piece of evidence favorable to the Moon Man, Thatcher felt the rush of a savage attack.

Thatcher twisted, snatching at his shoulder-holstered revolver. He was scarcely able to see the blurred shadow which leaped out of nothingness, through the doorway. Before he could lift his gun a fist drove powerfully to the line of his jaw. He straightened, staggered, felt himself crushed against the wall. At the same moment he heard a cracking blow, a pained moan from Keanan.

Tottering, barely able to keep his balance on his buckling legs, Thatcher felt his gun torn from his numb fingers. Hands snatched at him. The crushed hat was pulled from his grasp. He straightened, stifling a gasp of dismay, electrified by the realization that he was losing precious evidence, perhaps his only chance to prove the Moon Man's innocence. He swung a wild blow through empty darkness. Then, sensing that the attacker was still inside the basement, he flung himself into the doorway, braced to block it.

He could see nothing in the deep gloom, but he sensed that the man sheltered in the darkness was the killer of Homer Henshaw. That man, Thatcher's mind flashed, had rushed from the house immediately after firing the fatal shot, desperate to escape discovery. In his frantic haste he had lost his hat.

This damning loss had driven him back with the intention of recovering it in spite of the risk of being seen. His daring testified to its importance as evidence. Hiding in the court, he had seen Thatcher pick it out of the ashcan. His reckless assault had restored it to him. Now he was invisible in the darkness, but his husky voice came:

"Stand aside!"

THATCHER saw, his eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom, the glinting muzzle of an automatic. It was leveled straight at his heart. Upstairs there were footfalls, quick voices. The report of the first shot had alarmed the headquarters men in the house. They were hurrying down the stairs. Their approach quickened the wheezing breath of the killer whose face Thatcher still could not see. Weaponless, he faced a gun that had already quenched one life tonight, but he did not move.

"Then—die!"

Thunder broke inside the basement—but the killer's gun did not flash. Fire sprang from a point near the floor. The instant's light silhouetted the killer, limned the drawn face of Mark Keanan. It revealed Keanan huddled in agony on the cement, his service gun gripped in his left hand. His bullet spanged into the wall. The blast wrung startled shouts from the headquarters men hurrying from above. Instantly the shadow-masked killer leaped.

Thatcher dove to meet the attack—but he crumpled. The barrel of the murderer's automatic slashed downward with savage power. It whipped across the back of Thatcher's neck. He sprawled down, his mind pinwheeling. He sensed the unknown man springing over him. A timeless period of black chaos followed, until Thatcher felt his arms seized, felt himself being dragged up.

He blurted: "Stop him! The court—getting away! He killed Henshaw!"

Electric torches were criss-crossing in the cellar. Thatcher turned from the stabbing beams, stumbled out through

the door. He paused, peering around in painful confusion. The court was cut into segments by an ivied brick wall. The killer, no longer in sight, might have vaulted into any one of the other sections. Various paths of escape were possible. Thatcher moaned, gesturing wildly:

"Signal the prowl cars! Get around the block! That's the man we want! Go after him!"

Somebody howled at him: "The flash is already in!" Thatcher's persistent orders hurried his men into the street. Striving to collect his senses, he felt a despairing foreboding that his man had already fled the block. He could remember no detail that might serve to identify the murderer. About to hurry from the basement to take charge of the search in the streets he paused, gazing at Mark Keanan.

Two men had helped the stocky detective up from the floor. His ruddy face was twisted with suffering. His spread-fingered right hand looked as though it had been fried. It was blackened, blistered, oozing. Thatcher stooped quickly to examine Keanan's injury. He blurted:

"Mark, you've got to have that burn treated right away. It's serious. You're not going to be able to use that hand for a long time. What the devil happened to you?"

Keanan forced a wry, mirthless smile. "Whoever that rat was who jumped us, Steve, he socked me before I could get my gun out. Whipped me across the head with his gun. I fell back against the stove—hand went right down on those red-hot lids. I was out for a few seconds, I guess. Then, when I saw him trying to get you out of the doorway—I guess I'm not such a hot shot with my left hand."

Thatcher's hand tightened gratefully on Keanan's arm. "You didn't hit him, Mark, but you saved me from getting killed on the spot. He was on the point of putting a bullet in my heart when you stopped him. If you'd fired one second later, I'd be lying there on the floor now, as dead as Henshaw, and by the same gun. Thanks for that, old-timer. I'll never forget it."

Keanan formed with twisting lips: "Sorry—sorry I didn't drop him, Steve. A million to one it was—the Moon Man."

Thatcher started. "To my mind, Mark," he answered tightly, "this proves the Moon Man wasn't in on this job. In the first place, as I said, he wouldn't be wearing a hat, because he had his mask on. Second—"

"Granted," Keanan broke in, grimacing, "that the Moon Man wouldn't be wearing a hat and his mask at the same time, but maybe he put on his regalia right here, in the cellar, before going up to bleed Henshaw. That would account for the hat. In itself, the hat doesn't prove anything one way or another unless it can be tied up with somebody. Initials on the band, for instance. They would prove something. Where—where is that evidence, Steve?"

Thatcher looked around with stinging eyes. The glow of the torches showed him that the hat was nowhere in evidence. The fact that no report had yet come back to Thatcher, from the men he had ordered into the search, meant that the murderer had made good a desperate escape. With him the hat had vanished—silent testimony which, Thatcher was mortally certain, would have cleared the Moon Man of the murder of Homer Henshaw. Thatcher answered Keanan with a mockingly empty word:

"Gone!"

## CHAPTER III

### Perfect Alibi

TASTING the Gall of defeat, Thatcher helped Mark Keanan into a police machine. As it swung from the curb, bound for the nearest hospital, so that the detective's badly burned hand might speedily be treated, Thatcher turned to his roadster. With one vital clue lost, he considered another, far less promising. He removed from his pocket the memorandum slip he had found on the murdered man's desk and studied the cryptic note:

*Q.L., 11:30 p.m.*

Determined to follow the lead through, Thatcher started driving across the city.

Fifteen minutes later he curbed the roadster in front of a small house in an exclusive residential district. Latticed light shone through the lowered venetian blinds of the ground floor windows. Thatcher knocked. After a moment the door was opened by a strikingly handsome man of thirty odd, whose dark mustache was meticulously tapered, who was clad in a brilliant dressing jacket.

Thatcher knew him slightly. Quinn Layne was a broker, a prominent member of the exclusive younger social set, best known among men about town. He took Thatcher's hand, his smile disclosing perfect teeth, signaled Thatcher in. Too impatient to waste time, Thatcher paused in the vestibule. He asked flatly:

"Did you have an appointment with Homer Henshaw at eleven thirty tonight, Layne?"

"Why, yes," Quinn Layne admitted. "Why?"

"It's important," Thatcher returned, "because Homer Henshaw was murdered shortly before midnight."

He watched Layne's face intently, but Layne merely looked grieved. "I know. I heard it on the radio. I suppose this is routine investigation? Glad I'm not mixed up in it. I had the appointment with Henshaw tonight, you see, but I didn't keep it."

Thatcher, eyes narrowed, showed Layne the memorandum page. "These initials couldn't mean anybody but you," he explained. "A first name beginning with Q is highly unusual. Eleven-thirty at night is a strange time to make an appointment. If you'd kept it, you would have been on the scene at the time the murder was committed. Why didn't you keep it?"

Layne frowned. "I don't like your tone, Thatcher, but I'll tell you. Henshaw phoned me this morning to make the appointment. He wanted advice on an investment he'd made. He was going to attend a stockholders' meeting of the corporation tonight, and wanted to see me immediately afterward. That explains the time. I canceled the date later because I thought Henshaw could wait. Besides, I had a far pleasanter engagement for this evening. Look here, Thatcher. If you're insinuating—"

"I hope," Thatcher broke in doggedly, "your pleasanter engagement will help you account for yourself at the time—will prove you actually broke your appointment with Henshaw."

Layne bristled. "Certainly," he snapped. "I went to the Colony Club dance at the Mayfair. If you want corroboration, you shall have it. Just step in there, Thatcher. I think we'll settle this damned nonsense right now."

Thatcher, striding into Layne's modernistic living room, stopped short. He gazed, surprised, at a young woman who was just rising from a deep easy chair. She was wearing an enchanting gown, its blue heightening the color of her large eyes. She was smiling with disdainful amusement. In a quietly modulated voice she said:

"Good evening, Steve. I overheard, of course. It's quite true. Quinn took me to the Colony Club dance at the Mayfair. We were there together the whole evening. We came back only a moment ago. You can't possibly suspect he's involved in the murder of Homer Henshaw. It's too absurd.

Thatcher smiled wryly. This young woman's few words had completely alibied Quinn Layne, had destroyed his only remaining lead in his endeavor to clear the Moon Man. He could not doubt her testimony, was forced to free his mind of all possible doubt of her sincerity. She was a friend not only of Thatcher, but of his fiancé, Sue McEwen. Even more than that, she was the widowed daughter of Curtis Mead, the president of the board of police, whose authority over the department was absolute.

Thatcher said bitterly: "Thanks, Maris. Sorry, but—my job, you know. There's nothing more to be said. I'll be going."

Maris Mead laughed lightly as Thatcher returned to the entrance. Quinn Layne's good-night was politely sardonic. Slipping behind the wheel of his roadster, Thatcher's eyes thoughtfully narrowed. He drove slowly, his heart stinging with despair. He had irretrievably

lost the clue of the killer's hat, had been led by the memorandum into a dead end trail. Nothing remained. The stain of a cowardly murder was fixed upon the Moon Man. But abruptly, grimly intent, Thatcher sped his roadster along the dark street.

HE parked near a lunch counter. He shouldered into a telephone booth, dialed a number known only to him and two others in the world. It was that of an instrument in the secret rendezvous of the Moon Man. Immediately a husky, low voice answered: "Boss?"

It was Ned Dargan speaking. Dargan, an ex-pugilist, whom the Moon Man had long ago saved from sickness and starvation, was the ambassador extraordinary of the notorious criminal. It was he who distributed the Moon Man's loot to the destitute. He had kept Steve Thatcher's secret so valiantly that the Moon Man's crimes had become his. As the accomplice of the infamous crook, Dargan's fate must someday be the electric chair. But regardless of the fact that he was constantly being hunted by the police under the direction of the relentless McEwen, he continued to serve "the Boss" with courageous loyalty.

"Angel!" Thatcher said quietly. "I have a job for you. It's vital. It may be a false lead that will come to nothing, but it's the only play we can make. I want you—"

"Boss!" Dargan cut in. "The papers are full of the murder, saying the Moon Man did it. I know you'd never pull a killing, especially like that. You can count on me, Boss, to the limit. I'll do my damnedest to get the rat who killed Henshaw and fixed the blame on you."

"Bless you, Angel," Thatcher said sincerely. "The man we want is devilishly shrewd. He has cleverly covered himself, but we know one definite thing about him. He's desperately in need of money. He didn't get what he wanted from Henshaw tonight. He'll be forced to carry on his extortion scheme. He has already implicated the Moon Man, so, logically, he'll try to build up that angle. He might attempt to use the robe and mask again. I want you to be on watch, Angel.

"There's a rooming house directly across the street from headquarters. Rent one of those rooms immediately. Pick it so you can see into the chief's office. Keep your eye on the safe night and day. If anything suspicious happens, report it right away. It's a crazy gamble, Angel, and it means danger for you, but—"

"Forget about me, Boss! I don't matter, but we've got to clear you. I'm starting on the job right now!"

Thatcher pronged the receiver, filled with a foreboding failure. Suspicion of Quinn Layne still tantalized his mind in spite of the fact that Maris Mead had alibied him. The girl had not lied but, Thatcher thought, she might be mistaken. A crowded function like the Colony Club ball might have given Quinn an opportunity to slip away unseen. Yet one additional fact baffled Thatcher.

Quinn Layne could not possibly be the man who had spirited the robe and mask from the chief's safe, had worn it during the commission of a foul murder, then had as mysteriously returned it—not possibly.

THE morning was bright with clean sunshine. Steve Thatcher, worn after a sleepless night, swung his roadster to the curb at headquarters. Alighting, he saw a massive sedan braking near the entrance. Inside it sat the same beautiful young woman he had seen the previous evening, Maris Mead. The man who left the wheel was rod-backed, box shouldered, brusque of manner, stern of face. He was the girl's father, Curtis Mead, president of the police board. With a cold nod to Thatcher, he marched into the building.

Pausing, Thatcher glanced at the sooty front of the rooming house across the street. He saw no indication of Ned Dargan's presence, but he knew Dargan was behind one of the windows, tirelessly watching. The hunted assistant of the Moon Man was within a few yards of headquarters, alert to detect another robbery of the chief's safe. Smiling wry-

ly, Thatcher strode into the entrance. Reaching the top of the stairs, he heard Curtis Mead's voice crackling in the chief's office.

A girl was waiting at Thatcher's desk —Sue McEwen. He went to her quickly. At once his arms tightened around her, his lips sought hers—but she thrust herself back. She was a pretty and personably young woman, this daughter of the iron-nerved veteran of the force, completely in love with Thatcher, but her eyes were troubled, her face anxiously white. He saw anguished doubt in her gaze as she said in a whisper:

"I don't understand, Steve—what happened last night. It's such a horrible thing. I want to know the truth. Why did you try to blackmail Homer Henshaw? What forced you to—to kill him? Steve, I must know!"

Thatcher straightened, chilled. Dismay silenced him—dismay that the girl he loved believed him guilty of the murder. He realized that her father had told her of the evidence against the Moon Man, that it had condemned him even in her eyes. Only Sue and Ned Dargan knew Steve Thatcher was the Moon Man. She had repeatedly faced great danger to herself in order loyally to protect him against discovery. Her faith in him had never wavered, but now she was facing him tearfully, almost shrinking from his touch.

"Sue!" he blurted. "You can't believe that of me! I'm not the man who took the robe and mask out of the safe. I wasn't near the Henshaw place when the alarm flashed. Gil can tell you that. You can't think I've stooped to blackmail—that I'd murder a splendid old man like—"

"I don't want to believe it, Steve," the girl said in a strained tone, "but who else *could* have taken the robe and mask? You know the combination of the safe. You had an opportunity to take the regalia away. I hope with all my heart you had nothing to do with it, but all the evidence—"

"Sue, you've got to trust me!" Thatcher insisted grimly. "I can't explain here —not now. There's nothing I can say except that I had nothing whatever to do with it. Some one else has put the blame on me, Sue. So far I can't prove it, but—please don't doubt me."

"I'm trying, Steve—trying."

Thatcher turned from her, his heart pounding heavily. Sue's misgivings hurt him even more deeply than her father's mistaken conviction of the Moon Man's guilt. The fact that they were justified sharpened Thatcher's determination somehow to learn the truth. Nearing the chief's door, he heard Curtis Mead's voice snapping like a whiplash. He stepped into the office to find the president of the police board delivering an ultimatum to the grim McEwen.

"This time you can't admit failure, lieutenant! Twice last night the Moon Man sneaked into this office and opened the chief's safe—an intolerable mockery. The murder of my old friend Homer Henshaw is the most reprehensible crime ever committed in this city. For that the Moon Man must suffer the full penalty. You'll capture him promptly, lieutenant, or there'll be a thorough house-cleaning in this department. That's final!"

Mead turned, fixed Thatcher with a cold glare. "As for you, sergeant, see that your zeal doesn't run away with you. Suspecting Quinn Layne is fantastic. I'm glad my daughter was able to save him from the embarrassment of your bungling methods. If you subject either of them to the slightest further indignity, sergeant, I'll dismiss you from the force. That also is final. Good day!"

The president of the police board slammed out of the office. Thatcher looked wryly into McEwen's set, flushed face. Behind the ancient rolltop desk in the corner, Thatcher's father was sitting silent with chagrin. Peter Thatcher's blue-veined hand trailed through his shaggy white hair nervously. He was the nominal commander of the department who looked to McEwen for active generalship and results. With the chief's worried blue eyes upon him, McEwen emitted a savage snarl.

"By damn, Mead could rake me over the coals every day for a year, and I couldn't possibly try any harder to grab the Moon Man, because I've always done

my damnedest. But this time I'll nail him! This time he's gone too far. Getting his robe and mask out of this safe, then putting them back, is just too much. Not many men in this headquarters know the combination. If one of them is the Moon Man— his thumb-print will prove it!"

McEwen flipped a dog-eared photograph from his wallet. It was a magnified impression of whorls and loops left by the Moon Man on a door knob during the commission of the notorious criminal's very first robbery. Every line of it was etched on McEwen's mind. Steve Thatcher's thumb had made that print, could make another exactly like it. It would constitute perfect proof that the son of the chief of police was the Moon Man. Thatcher stood breathless while McEwen, peering intently at the photograph, ground on:

"I'll get a fresh print from every man on this force! I'll check everybody, regardless of who he is—including myself, and you, chief, and you, Steve!" Steve Thatcher winced. "There won't be a chance of the Moon Man's getting away with this if—"

THE door had opened. Mark Keanan had stepped into the office, followed by a younger man. Thatcher recognized the second as Mark Keanan's son Neil. Stalwart, clean-cut, thoroughly admirable, Steve Thatcher knew Neal Keanan to be connected with the largest, most conservative banking institution in Great City. He held a promising future. Proud of his father's record as a detective, he often dropped into police headquarters. But the smile faded from his face as McEwen's glare turned upon Mark Keanan—upon Keanan's right hand, bound with bandages.

Mark Keanan broke the tight silence with: "Looks like I won't be much good with a gun for a while, Gil. The burn went pretty deep. Damn near lost the flesh off my fingers. It'll be a long time healing, the doctor says, but I want to stay on the job regardless."

McEwen's eyes were blazing. Intuitively Thatcher sensed the thoughts racing through the veteran's mind. The single print, strongest evidence yet found against the Moon Man, had been made by the right thumb. Mark Keanan's right thumb was heavily swathed in lint and gauze. Abruptly McEwen, whipped with anger, blurted:

"That thumb of yours, Mark. What about it? Are the ridges burned off? Could you give me your print? Or is it impossible now to check it against the Moon Man's?"

Mark Keanan stiffened. His son's face went white. Neil Keanan stepped forward frowning. "Look here!" he snapped. "Are you inferring that my father is the Moon Man—that he burned his hand so he couldn't be checked up on? That's crazy! A man with his fine record! No, he can't give you a thumb-print now. But even to think he could possibly be—"

"Gil!" Keanan blurted. "Do you imagine I'd do this painful thing to myself just on the chance that you might want to check me up against the Moon Man's print?"

"The electric chair," McEwen said gruffly, "burns a hell of a lot worse, Mark."

Another dismayed silence followed. The sudden turn of suspicion on Mark Keanan electrified Steve Thatcher. He spoke quickly: "You're dead wrong, Gil! I was with Mark when he burned his hand. It was an accident. You're letting this thing get you—suspecting Mark. Take it from me, Gil, suspicious as it might look, you're on the wrong track!" Then, tight and cold, another silence.

The acid of irony bit into Steve Thatcher. He, the real Moon Man, had been forced in all fairness to defend a detective who had sworn to send him to the death house. He could not forget that last night Keanan had saved him from a murderer's bullet in the heart. Keanan's further work on the case might spell doom for the Moon Man, but Thatcher could not allow himself, by remaining silent, to further McEwen's suspicion. He saw a sly light creep into the veteran's gray eyes.

"Sure, sure," McEwen said gratingly. "I guess you're right, Steve. I'm so al-

mighty set on nailing the Moon Man I'm not thinking straight any more. I'm sorry, Mark—I went off half cocked. I should have known better. I'm probably screwy for believing the Moon Man is somebody connected with headquarters anyway. His robbing the chief's safe was only a trick to put me on a false trail. That theory's no good. Let's forget it."

Mark Keanan forced a wan smile. "Certainly, Gil," he said uneasily. "It never happened. Just don't forget I'm as hell-bent on collaring the Moon Man as you are."

"Sure," McEwen drawled again, tucking the photograph of the print back into his wallet. "Sure."

But Steve Thatcher, studying McEwen's deep-lined face as Mark and Neil Keanan left the office, saw the crafty light sharpen in the detective's eyes. Thatcher realized McEwen's easy dismissal was a sly subterfuge. McEwen was still sharply suspicious of Mark Keanan. He had apparently decided to play a shrewd game by biding his time, by keeping his own counsel and laying a trap for the man who had saved Steve Thatcher's life.

"One thing's certain, Steve," McEwen grated, eyes narrowed. "We've forced the Moon Man into a tight spot. All the evidence against him in the Henshaw case is absolutely conclusive. We have his robe and mask here, and he's not able to operate safely without 'em. There's one sure way to get him now—to force him into action without the mask. I can do it. Then, the next move he makes—by damn, it'll be his last!"

## CHAPTER IV

### Cloak of Invisibility

McEWEN'S heels pounded back and forth across the chief's office. All day he had remained there, his presence guarding the Moon Man's regalia locked in the safe. He had maintained an ominous silence. His teeth crunching into his cigar, his slitted eyes testified that his mind was shrewdly planning. Steve Thatcher, sitting in his father's padded swivel chair, watched McEwen anxiously, sensing unknown danger in the tough-skinned veteran's wordlessness.

As McEwen paced, Thatcher glanced out the window. Most of the panes of the rooming house across the street were dark. Behind one of those grimy squares of glass, he knew, Ned Dargan was still persistently watching. Darkness had brought an even more trying tension to Steve Thatcher's nerves. Hopeless as he found his endeavor to clear the Moon Man, he felt, somehow, that a zero hour was approaching.

McEwen turned suddenly. He fastened his hard hand on the handle of the safe, tried to twist it, found it rigid. The vault was locked. He turned back, toothing his cigar, and gestured shortly to Thatcher.

"I've got a feeling something's going to break. If it does, I'm going to be ready for it. Keep your eye on that safe while I'm gone, Steve. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He strode from the office. It was characteristic of McEwen to keep his plans to himself. His being a lone wolf of the law made him a formidable adversary whose moves could not be anticipated. Thatcher stared at the door uneasily, trying to divine McEwen's thoughts. Presently the ringing of a bell stirred him. The telephone in Thatcher's office was ringing. Thinking it might be information from Dargan, to be received secretly, he left the chief's desk, hurried along the hall to his own. The instrument brought him not Dargan's voice, but Sue McEwen's.

"Steve," she said quietly. "I've been waiting for you to call. Probably you've forgotten we're both expected at the Meads' garden party this evening. We can't let anyone else know anything has come up between us—they'd expect explanations. It's best that we go and—"

"I'm sorry, Sue," Thatcher answered. "I had forgotten. My mind's on this case and nothing else. I've got to stick on the job now until I get results. I'll see you later, because we must talk this thing out. You'll go, anyway, of course."

The girl said gravely: "All right, Steve."

Thatcher lingered troubled at the instrument. Sue's doubt remained, haunting him. It made heavier the despair in his heart. He walked slowly from his desk toward the chief's door, searching his mind vainly for some new lead to follow. He looked up to see Gil McEwen mounting the stairs. McEwen was gnawing his cigar, scowling. With only a glance at Thatcher, he thrust through the chief's door. Immediately Thatcher heard his rasp:

"Steve! Come in here!"

Thatcher stopped short just over the sill. McEwen was standing straddled, staring at the hulking black cube in the corner. Thatcher had left the lights burning, but now they were out. The gloom in the office was alleviated by a shine shafting up from the street. It stretched a shadow of the safe across the wall. McEwen groped to the switch, snapped it, blinked through the glare.

Only a moment ago the vault had been locked, but now the steel door was standing ajar. McEwen bounded to it, swung it wide, reached inside. Amazed, Thatcher saw him whirl away. His heels banged into the corridor. His resounding shout brought blue-shirted men crowding out of half a dozen rooms. He bellowed at them:

"Get down to the doors! Guard every one of 'em! Find out who left this building the last few minutes! Stop anybody trying to leave with a bundle no matter who he is, and grab it! The Moon Man was in this building a minute ago—may still be, by damn! *Move!*"

The patrolmen scampered. McEwen charged back into the chief's office. Steve Thatcher felt his nerves congeal as he stared into the gaping safe, into the inner compartment. Now no black, bundled robe was visible, no silver mask. The regalia of the Moon Man had vanished.

Steve Thatcher's widened eyes turned out of the window. Fiery hope filled him as he gazed toward the room in which his orders had stationed Ned Dargan—hope that the Angel had witnessed the theft of the robe and mask from the safe. If he had, it was a vitally valuable lead. Thatcher burned with an impulse to hurry to Dargan, but he could not. Suddenly he felt McEwen's eyes upon him—eyes fiercely afire.

McEwen rasped: "He's done it again, by damn! The Moon Man's opened the chief's safe again right under our noses. The minute my back was turned! I left you watching that safe, Steve. How the devil was it humanly possible for anyone to slip past you?"

Thatcher blurted: "I went to my office to answer a phone call from Sue. I was gone only a minute. I'm certain no one came in here from the corridor. I would have noticed him. He must have come through the connecting doors, from one of the other offices. He must have been watching his chance."

"Unless," McEwen cut in acidly, "nobody else came in here at all."

Thatcher scarcely heard McEwen's cryptic thrust. Conjecture was flashing through his quickened mind. He knew the robber of the chief's safe had used the combination which only a few men connected with headquarters knew. He turned quickly, flipped open the telephone directory, found the name and number he sought. He called it. A suave, confident voice answered—that of Quinn Layne.

The sound of it utterly destroyed Thatcher's suspicion that Layne might have pilfered the Moon Man's regalia. Layne could not possibly have reached his home from headquarters so quickly. Stifling his keen disappointment, Thatcher said quietly:

"Just wanted to say I'm sorry for bursting in on you last evening, Layne. Of course, you're entirely in the clear. You'll be at the Meads' garden party tonight?"

"That's all right, Thatcher," Layne replied magnanimously. "Your job, as you said. Yes, I'll be there. Hope to see you and Sue. It will be a very festive occasion."

Thatcher's forehead was furrowed with puzzlement as he turned from the instrument. A patrolman, one of those whom McEwen's orders had scattered to the doors, was just entering. He made a bewildered gesture and reported:

"We haven't turned up anything, lieutenant. If some one slipped out of the building a few miutes ago, nobody noticed. It couldn't have been a stranger, in that case. We're pretty sure nobody's hiding in any of the offices. If the Moon Man was in here, he melted into thin air, that's all!"

McEwen's wave signaled the patrolman out. He closed the door tightly. Again his steely eyes turned searchingly upon Steve Thatcher. He repeated his cryptic utterance:

"Unless nobody else came in here at all. Unless he's still right here."

Now Thatcher realized the meaning of McEwen's words—realized it with coldness lancing his heart. Unless, McEwen meant, Steve Thatcher had himself opened the safe. Unless Thatcher had seized the Moon Man's regalia and hidden it somewhere else inside headquarters. Unless—Steve Thatcher was the Moon Man!

THATCHER blurted: "Gil—you can't reasonably think I'm responsible for this! I'm as mystified by it as you are. I can't explain how the robe and mask disappeared." Then, throat tight, he risked a direct, blunt question: "Do you believe *I'm* the Moon Man?"

The metallic glitter in McEwen's eyes persisted a moment, then softened. The pinch of his thin lips became a smile. Again he spoke in that ingratiating drawl which Thatcher knew masked a shrewd strategy.

"Sure not, Steve. Sure not. Why, if I did, all I'd have to do is ask you for a print of your right thumb, and that would settle the whole business once and for all, wouldn't it?" Thatcher's nerves snapped at that. "Why, by damn, you're my best freind, the last man in the world I'd want to turn up as the Moon Man—the last I'd ever want to suspect." But the very blandness of McEwen's tone warned Thatcher that McEwen's suspicion of him was sharp and pointed.

The lieutenant's manner grew taut. "Look here, Steve. The Moon Man ran a terrible risk, coming back here a second time for his regalia. He must need the robe and mask desperately. It means he's forced to make a new move. What can it be? Let's try to reason it out. Maybe by sheer logic we can anticipate him. If we do, then by damn, we've got him bagged. Follow this through, Steve—"

Thatcher was wondering about Dargan. Had Dargan seen the robe and mask stolen from the safe? Had he identified the thief? Why hadn't he reported? The questions buzzed through Thatcher's mind like tantalizing flies as McEwen continued:

"First, why did the Moon Man steal his robe and mask now, comparatively early in the evening, instead of later tonight when there would have been much less chance of his being caught at it? There's only one answer to that. He needs the regalia right away. He couldn't wait. This job he's planning must be—"

Thatcher interrupted: "My telephone's ringing, Gil. I'll be right back." He turned from McEwen, hurried hopefully into his office. Carefully he closed the door, took up the instrument. The husky voice on the line was Ned Dargan's.

"Boss!" the Angel explained. "Couldn't call sooner, but I saw it. First the lights went out in the chief's office. I couldn't see the face of the man who opened the safe, but he made a short job of it—knew the combination. He skipped out pronto with the robe and mask. Next I saw somebody come out of the side entrance of headquarters. Still couldn't see his face, but he was carrying a bundle. I beat it down and started trailing him."

"Good work, Angel!"

"He hopped a cab, and I chased him in another. I didn't dare get too close, but I saw him pay off the driver on Blair Boulevard. He walked to the house on the corner, where West Street crosses the boulevard, then all at once dodged into the driveway. He still had the bundle. He's been under cover ever since, Boss. I'm phoning from a drug store a block away. Looks like he's planning a job at that place."

"That place," Thatcher answered wryly, "is the home of Maris Mead. It's right next door to the place owned by the presi-

dent of the police board. The Meads are having a big garden party tonight—"

"That's it, Boss! The grounds of the house next door are all decorated. There's a crowd there now. Looks like a fancy blowout. I'm going back to watch the place on the corner until you show up, Boss!"

"Coming, Angel!"

Pulse quick, Thatcher strode back to the chief's office. McEwen's eyes fixed him thoughtfully. He realized he had gained a precious advantage, that it promised proof of the Moon Man's innocence of the Henshaw murder, yet he knew he must play it carefully. He told McEwen:

"I think you're right, Gil. The Moon Man must have a job ready to pull very soon. What are the possibilities for robbery tonight? Very few. The garden party at the Meads' place is the most promising—jewels, other valuables, plenty of money being carried by the wealthy set. That must be the Moon Man's objective, because he needs funds after his failure to collect from Henshaw last night. Our move is to watch the Meads' place—"

"Exactly!" McEwen grated. "We agree. Ever since the Moon Man began operating, Steve, I've been keeping check on social affairs like the Meads' party, because that class is the Moon Man's favorite victims. The Meads' shindig overshadows everything else in town tonight. It's a thousand to one the Moon Man will turn up there. Stick with me, Steve!"

Thatcher, following McEwen down the stairs, wondered at his friend's complete agreement. Did it mean that he had eavesdropped through the door of Thatcher's office, had overheard mention of the Mead name? Was it part of the trap McEwen was setting? Thatcher could not know McEwen's purpose, but he was sure it was backed by a grim resolve that the criminal career of the Moon Man must end tonight.

Reaching the lower corridor, McEwen barked out a command. Surprised, Thatcher saw a group of uniformed men hurry out of the muster room. Each was carrying a rifle. They dropped into squad formation, snapped to attention. Thatcher realized with a start that McEwen had already ordered these men in reserve for fast action in case of an emergency. Now he clicked orders at them:

"We're driving to the home of Curtis Mead immediately. You're going in quietly, so as to be seen by as few persons as possible. I'm going to station you around the grounds and in the upper windows of the house. You're to cover every square inch of the place. If you spot the Moon Man—stop him! Don't kill him, don't even wound him if you can help it. But crack that mask off his head—close him in with bullets. Don't forget that the whole purpose of this move tonight is to finish that fancy crook. Get going!"

The squad tramped to cars in the adjoining garage. McEwen strode to his coupé. Tersely he directed Thatcher: "Go ahead in your roadster, Steve. Look the place over. We'll be right behind you. I'll watch from the house. You keep an eye on the rear of the grounds. We're all set. If the Moon Man shows, it'll be his last job."

Again Thatcher caught that hard, gray glint in McEwen's eyes. Now, instinctively, he grasped the full meaning of this strategy. It was McEwen's intention to clinch the case against the Moon Man by catching him red-handed. Deliberately he was opening the way to the Moon Man's doom.

McEwen still doggedly suspected that Steve Thatcher was the Moon Man, was deliberately daring him to walk into a trap. And not even if the truth were revealed that the Moon Man was the chief of police, Steve Thatcher knew, would the relentless McEwen flinch from the full demands of his duty.

STEVE THATCHER nosed his roadster into a line of cars strung out before the Mead estate on Blair Boulevard. Looking back, he saw three other machines approaching—the police autos carrying McEwen and the rifle squad. They stopped in the gloom. The detective and his men alighted. They were quietly approaching the house, soon to be watchful-

ly posted, when Thatcher entered the grounds. With anxiety burning his heart, he gazed upon a festive scene.

The expansive gardens and grounds of the Mead home were crowded with girls and women in gossamer evening gowns, with men in white tuxedo coats. From tree to tree varicolored Japanese lanterns were festooned, radiating a rainbow glow. Couples were dancing on a glassy floor built around the rippling fountain while the tinkle of an orchestra mixed with laughter and happy conversation. The occasion was one of lighthearted pleasure, yet Steve Thatcher looked upon it with dread.

Smilingly he greeted the host and hostess. Curtis Mead attempted to be affable, but his sternness did not completely melt. Thatcher went on, nodding to friends. He saw Curtis Mead called into the house by a servant, returned in a few moments. Soon dark movements appeared at the upper windows of the huge house. McEwen's men were taking their places. Ready rifles were looking down upon a scene of gaiety.

"Steve!"

Thatcher heard Sue McEwen's quiet voice, turned to find her hand on his arm. Her foamy gown gave her a dreamlike quality, yet her cheeks were pale, her lips drawn. In her wan face Thatcher saw the effects of the poison of doubt. Her anxious eyes questioned him. He told her softly:

"I'm here on official business, Sue. No time to talk. Gil's set to put the hooks in the Moon Man tonight if he shows here." Thatcher smiled wryly. "I'm as eager as he is now to corner the crook wearing the robe and mask, but—" A fluttering of the nearby hedge turned his eyes. "Don't be alarmed. It's a dangerous chance, but I've got to try to get the regalia back if—"

He broke off, startled by a dim face appearing in the parted greenery. Through the iridescent shadows Thatcher glimpsed the features of Ned Dargan. He stifled an exclamation, excused himself from Sue. Conscious that her gaze was worriedly following him, he followed a path that took him into the grounds of the next house. Alertly he crossed the lawn toward the spot where he had seen Dargan.

This home, he knew, was that of Curtis Mead's daughter Maris. The president of the police board had built it for her upon her marriage years ago. Since the death of her husband in an airplane accident, Maris had continued to occupy it. It was smaller than her father's, of modern design, surrounded by well-kept gardens. Thatcher, studying it, paused when he saw a side door open.

Maris Mead and Quinn Layne appeared, her jeweled hand on his arm. Her flowered gown outlined her alluring figure. Layne was impeccably garbed. Talking, laughing together, they sauntered along the path, disappeared through the hedge. Once they were out of sight, Thatcher drifted on. Warily glancing up at the windows from which McEwen's men were watching, he huddled down into the shadow. Dargan's hand closed tightly on his arm.

"Boss! I've been watching this place ever since I called you. The bird who stole the mask and robe from the chief's office is hiding somewhere on the grounds. I've heard him move, but I haven't seen him. Last I knew, he was on the other side of the house. Looks like he's been waiting for a chance to get in. All the servants are over helping with the party. Now that the girl and Layne have left—Boss! Look!"

Thatcher had glimpsed it—light vanishing from two downstairs windows. Tight-nerved, he watched. In a moment two more windows went dark. No movement was visible through the draperies, but Thatcher knew that some one was quickly moving from room to room, snapping off the electric switches. He rose, signaling caution to Dargan. He glided to the far side of the house, saw that every pane had gone black. His hand slid toward his shoulder-holstered gun.

"He's in there now, Boss!"

"Keep out of sight, Angel!"

Thatcher took slow, silent steps toward a pair of French doors. He paused, pressing against the wall. Now he saw a faint

flicker of light flash from the room that had been dark. He eased closer to the glass, peering in through a silk curtain. Its folds confused his vision, but he could see the shining lens of an electric torch. It was hovering like a giant firefly, its beam turned upon a desk. Then Thatcher saw the movement of a black-gloved hand—saw a vague, robed figure with a spherical head that gleamed silver.

The false Moon Man was at work.

## CHAPTER V

### Silver Boomerang

TAUTLY Thatcher drew back. He signaled Dargan. They drifted to the rear corner of the house. Peering across the dividing hedge, at the upstairs windows of Curtis Mead's home, he again saw the dark movements of the men watching with poised rifles. Laughter and music filled the balmy night air, but the presence of McEwen's men frosted Thatcher's heart. He whispered tersely to Dargan:

"Watch yourself, Angel! Keep an eye on the side door. If I don't collar that crook in there now, the Moon Man will never be cleared. I'm going in."

While Dargan stared anxiously, Thatcher eased open the rear entrance. Just inside he paused, every muscle drawn tight. The colored shine of the Japanese lanterns from the adjoining grounds showed him a large pantry opening on the left, a hallway leading directly to the room in which the false Moon Man was operating. That man, Thatcher told himself, was a desperate killer. An advance upon him was inviting a lethal bullet. But Thatcher glided toward the library, his service gun in his hand, his heart pounding, every nerve afire.

He paused, looking upon the ghostly figure with the globular silver head. The false Moon Man was bent over a desk, back turned. His torch was resting on the blotter. He was rifling a drawer, his manner frantically quick. Gazing fixedly at the gleaming silver mask, Thatcher poised. Suddenly his muscles threw him into a lithe leap. He bounded to a stop at the side of the false Moon Man, the muzzle of his revolver pressed hard against the black-robed body.

"Raise your hands! Turn around!"

Thatcher's startlingly quick move, his ringing command, shocked a muffled exclamation from the phantom with the spherical head. The dark figure jerked straight, twisted. Thatcher felt the unseen eyes fix upon him. He heard a muted moan of despair. Straddled, gun firm, lips thinned, Thatcher confronted his spectral captive. He clicked out another order:

"Take off that mask!"

One moment the black-robed figure did not move. Thatcher reiterated imperatively: "Take it off!" He saw the cloaked shoulders sag. His prisoner's hands lifted slowly. One of those hands was black-gloved, but the other was white and large. Startled, Thatcher watched the hinged hemispheres of the mask parted. The precious glass device was fumblingly lifted, lowered. In the reflected glow of the torch lying on the desk Thatcher saw the pasty, deeplined face of the false Moon Man.

He jerked as if struck. Appalled, his eyes widened, he stared. A name broke from his lips—lips suddenly feelingless. It was:

"Mark!"

Detective Sergeant Mark Keanan lowered the fragile globe to the desk. His jaw squared grimly as he returned Thatcher's glinting gaze. For a moment words were beyond him. Then, his voice husky and strained, he blurted out:

"Steve—Steve, listen to me! You've got to believe me! I didn't kill Homer Henshaw. I've committed no crime except this—breaking in. I had to do it, Steve—there was no other way. In the name of heaven, let me explain!"

Utter dumbfoundment held S t e v e Thatcher motionless. Though the service gun in his clenched hand was still leveled at Mark Keanan, he had forgotten it. A bitter taste filled his mouth. He was remembering that Mark Keanan's record in the plainclothes division was the best. He was recalling that Keanan had repeat-

edly sworn to send the Moon Man to the death house. But now Keanan stood before Thatcher—the real Moon Man—wearing the black robe of the criminal he had condemned.

"Believe me, Steve!" Keanan implored breathlessly. "I swear I'm telling the truth. I didn't kill Henshaw. Before heaven, I swear I didn't!"

STEVE THATCHER said huskily: "Talk fast!"

Keanan's words sped. "I was in Henshaw's house last night—I admit that. At the very moment it happened, Steve. I heard the shot. But I didn't see the man who fired it—not even a glimpse of him. I'm sure of who did it, but I haven't any proof. That's one reason I kept quiet, Steve. Another is—I was there as the Moon Man. And if I'd spoken it would have destroyed—"

"Who do you suspect, Mark?" Thatcher asked tightly.

"Layne," Keanan answered at once. "Quinn Layne. Listen, Steve. Let me tell you the whole thing from the beginning. Layne appears to be a respectable socialite, but in reality he's an unscrupulous blackmailer. I'm certain he put his hooks into Henshaw. He trapped my son Neil. I've been trying to save Neil from him. That's why I've been forced to all this. There was no other way. Listen, Steve."

Thatcher, peering into Keenan's anguished eyes, knew he was speaking the truth, knew each word was backed by a reckless desperation.

"Layne has worked a devilishly clever scheme. His first move is to give one of his friends a small check. The amount doesn't matter—say ten dollars, to pay a bet. The friend cashes the check. In a few days Layne comes to him with it. The check now reads ten thousand dollars. Layne declares his friend has raised it. As further proof, he shows his bank statement. On the statement, recorded at the same date, is an entry of a check for ten thousand dollars cashed. Layne delivers an ultimatum. Unless his victim makes good the difference at once, he'll swear out a warrant."

Thatcher, eyes narrowed, urged: "Go on!"

"Layne's friend is caught. The evidence—the check, the bank statement, even the testimony of a teller who Layne pays bribe money to lie—shows that Layne's friend is guilty of raising the check. If he's arrested, he'll certainly be convicted and sent to prison. His friend has a social position and business connections which will be completely wrecked. Layne holds the power to destroy his whole life. The victim pays to save himself. That's where Layne has been getting all his money, Steve, not from his brokerage business. He's a merciless human leech!"

Thatcher demanded: "Exactly how does he work that extortion scheme, Mark?"

"Simply, easily. The teller whom he has bribed tells him when the friend cashes the check. That same day Layne goes to his bank, to this same teller, and cashes another check to his own order for a thousand times that amount. That makes the record on the bank statement. A few days later he gets the statement from the bank, including the two checks—the small one he gave his friend and the large one he cashed himself. He destroys the large one. He raises the small one, issued to his friend, to a thousand times its original amount. That's all, Steve. But it places his friend at his mercy."

Thatcher asked tightly: "How did you learn that, Mark? And knowing the facts, why didn't you, as a detective, grab him for it?"

"Because he hooked Neil," Keanan declared bitterly. "He gave a check to Neil in payment of a bet for five dollars and raised it to five thousand. He threatened that unless Neil made good the difference he'd send Neil to prison. Do you realize Neil's position, Steve? He's with the most conservative bank in the city. His only training is in banking. It's his whole future. The merest suggestion of dishonesty on his part will ruin his career, his life. That's the reason I've done this, Steve—to save my son. Because Neil means more to me than anything else in the world. But so far—so far I've failed."

THATCHER was gazing deep into Mark Keanan's haggard eyes, and he was listening. He could hear the dance music, the laughter, floating from the adjoining grounds. He knew that McEwen and McEwen's men were still grimly watching. At any moment, he realized, an alarm might sound. Unconsciously his gun had lowered. He listened intently as Mark Keanan went on wretchedly.

"I didn't dare make an open move against Layne—not while he held the power to destroy Neil's whole life. As a detective my hands were tied. We didn't have the five thousand. I had to do something—beat Layne's game somehow. I reasoned it out. He must be bleeding a number of victims. I thought if I could find proof of it, the mere number of cases would prove his blackmailing. No one of his victims, of course, knew about any of the others. It was up to me to get the facts together, prove that Layne had done it again and again. It was my only hope of breaking his hold on Neil.

"I shadowed Layne. I spotted him centering on Henshaw. He was negotiating with the old man. Then, shadowing Henshaw, I saw him draw a large sum from his bank. That meant he was about to pay Layne. I had to keep out of it as a detective for Neil's sake. That's why I used this robe and mask when I went to Henshaw's place last night. As the Moon Man, I was going to expose Layne to Henshaw. I went in the back way a few minutes after I saw Layne go in the front. Then the shot—killing the old man and destroying my chance."

Thatcher's eyes were shining with sympathy. "But why," he asked tightly, "did you come here tonight? Maris Mead can't know anything about Layne's extortion scheme."

"Of course not. She doesn't suspect him. Listen: My object from the first was to find evidence that Layne has blackmailed a number of people. If all his victims knew the truth, they could act together against him, safely. Evidence—the raised checks. Where does he keep them? I reasoned he wouldn't dare keep them in a single safe deposit box, because those boxes can be opened by the police on court order, in case of trouble. Finding a number of raised checks together would cook Layne's goose. He was too smart to let himself in for that, I figured.

"But, checking up, I discovered he had no box. He's too well-known to have rented a number of boxes under false names, one for each check. Using his own name for all of them would let him in for the same danger. That meant he had a special hiding-place for them. One night I ransacked his office and searched his safe, but I didn't find them. Next I broke into his home and hunted all through it, without finding a single bit of evidence. There's only one other place where he comes often, which he might use as a hiding place. This house—Maris Mead's. I knew if he'd hidden the checks here it was without her knowledge, but I had to follow it through. That's why I came here tonight, to search—"

Thatcher's head wagged. "It's a mighty small chance, Mark. Yet without that evidence—"

"Without it, Layne has Neil cornered. Early tonight he phoned Neil—a final demand. If Layne isn't paid the money right away, he'll go to Neil's employers. It's a matter of life and death, but I can't get that amount. I've found nothing here, Steve—nothing. I'm licked. Steve, listen! I'll answer for what I've done, but let me go ahead and try to find—"

Thatcher broke in: "You can't take the chance, Mark! You don't know it, but McEwen's over in the next house. He has men with rifles posted at the windows and around the grounds. They have orders to shoot at sight of the Moon Man. If you're seen—"

Bitterly Keanan blurted: "I'm willing to let that crook take the blame for this, Steve. I hate the Moon Man. He's got the chair coming to him anyway. My conscience is clear about using his robe and mask. Let him face the music!"

Thatcher straightened wryly. This man had saved him from a killer's bullet. Steve Thatcher owed his life to Mark Keanan. The real Moon Man was in debt to the false. Keanan's denunciation stung deep. Lips thinned, he protested:

"You don't realize what a spot you're in, Mark. Suppose McEwen corners you in that robe and mask. He believes utterly that the man who wore them last night is guilty of murdering Homer Henshaw. Every bit of evidence bears him out. You admit you have no proof against Layne to justify yourself, therefore you have absolutely no defense. If McEwen grabs you now, Mark, he'll believe you're the Moon Man. You've lost the only possible way of proving you're not—the thumbprint. Once you're grabbed, you'll face the chair not only for Henshaw's death, but for all the Moon Man's crimes!"

Thatcher gazed narrowly at Keanan's right hand—a mass of lint and gauze covering a burn Keanan had suffered in his courageous act of saving Thatcher's life from being blasted away by a bullet—an act now threatening to doom him.

"I know, Steve, I know," Keanan moaned in despair, "but I can't stop now. I've got to go on trying to find the checks Layne has hidden. I'm sure he's sneaked them out of sight somewhere in this house. They're valuable to him because he can use them for further blackmail. They must be here somewhere, but if I don't find them—"

A husky voice cut into Keanan's words. It came from the rear of the house. The door had opened quietly. Ned Dargan had shouldered in. His whisper reached Thatcher and Keanan, startling them, chilling them.

"Boss! Somebody coming! Layne and the girl at the side door! Watch yourself, Boss!"

Thatcher spun, holstering his revolver. He saw the shadows of the approaching man and the girl in the colored light on the entrance pane. They were close—so close that even then Layne was reaching for the knob. With a blurted exclamation, Keanan started toward the hall. Instantly Thatcher gripped his arm.

"Not out there! You don't dare show yourself! McEwen's men watching!"

He dragged Keanan back. His swift gaze stopped on a door near the desk. Snatching it open, he saw a closet revealed. He thrust the breathless Keanan into it. Quickly he picked up the silver mask and pressed it into Keanan's hands. Keanan's bandaged paw closed on it tenderly. Thatcher thrust the closet shut. He turned, poised to bound out of the room.

A click, a glare froze him. He stopped short, staring at the side entrance. Quinn Layne and Maris Mead had just entered. Layne's hand was dropping from the wall-switch. His eyes were fixed upon Steve Thatcher—cold, condemning, ominous.

## CHAPTER VI

### PHANTON'S RETRIBUTION

QUINN LAYNE'S quick, angry stride carried him straight to Steve Thatcher. The girl indignantly watched them confront each other. Thatcher felt the withering force of Layne's gaze. Layne said with a crackle:

"Maris's father warned you not to molest us again, I believe. This is even worse than questioning me—sneaking into Maris's home like a thief. It's more than we'll tolerate, Thatcher. You've gone too far. I think you'll find Curtis Mead is a man of his word. You're going to get broken off the force."

Thatcher's throat went hot. "I have no doubt whatever," he said quietly, "that you'll be able to accomplish that. I might explain that I saw something suspicous over here and came to investigate, but let it go. I have no apologies to make. Good night."

He walked stiffly past Layne, past the girl, out the side entrance. Eyes stinging with anxiety, he glanced back once, thinking of Mark Keanan, with the damning robe and mask of the Moon Man, hiding in the closet within a few feet of Layne. He left the path, circuited through the shadows to the rear of the house. In a moment a movement stirred the gloom. Ned Dargan drifted to Thatcher's side.

"Boss! I heard what Keanan told you. Looks to me like he hasn't got a chance of winning out. If he's grabbed now—"

"Keanan has sworn to see the Moon Man get the chair, Angel," Thatcher said quietly, "but I've no intention of seeing him suffer for the Moon Man's crimes.

Watch yourself, Angel. It's dangerous for you here. I may need your help, but—" His gaze sharpened at a light shining on the rear of the grounds. "What's that? What are those men doing?"

"Heard 'em say something about fireworks, Boss. There's going to be a display. The stuff's been stored in the girl's garage, and now they're taking it over to her father's place." Dargan declared earnestly: "You know you can count on me to the limit, Boss."

Thatcher was leaning close to a window, gazing intently into the house. "I know I can, Angel. We've got to move fast. I have a plan—a long gamble—but it may work. One of my reasons for going in there was to get the robe and mask back. I still want them. But now—" He looked through the curtains at Layne and Maris Mead then, consumed with desperate purpose, q u i c k l y turned away . . . .

Quinn Layne and Maris Mead were standing in the center of the library. Layne's sharpened eyes were scrutinizing the room. For long minutes he did not move. His gaze settled on the desk—on the flashlight lying on the blotter, still glowing. He went to it, picked it up, looked around again. He said quietly:

"Somebody was searching through the desk. Perhaps it was Thatcher. What could he have been looking for, in your place, Maris? Certainly he can't suspect you of anything shady. It seems like an attempt at robbery. I don't like this. Lieutenant McEwen is over in your father's house. While I see what's missing, suppose you go over and tell McEwen—Wait!" Layne's voice crackled. "Stay where you are. I thought I heard—"

Maris Mead had also caught a muffled sound, as of a dry sob. Her eyes turned, with Layne's, toward the door beside the desk. At his gesture, she opened a lower drawer. She took out a small automatic, placed it in Layne's hand, silently retreated. Layne leveled it at the door. He took a soundless step forward, gripped the knob. Suddenly he stepped back, gun glittering.

It was pointing straight at a ghostly black figure standing in the closet—a phantom form whose right hand was concealed in the folds of its dark robe, whose left was also leveling a gun, whose globular, spherical head glimmered like the moon.

A moment Layne stood unmoving, his weapon covering the spectral being, the cloaked man's pointing at him. Then a sly, slow smile formed on Layne's lips. He straightened with arrogant confidence. He said dryly:

"Mr. Moon Man, you're cornered. You might possibly shoot me, but you can never get away with it. Your deadly enemy, Lieutenant McEwen, is in the next house, within easy hearing distance. He has a squad of men with him who are looking for you at this moment. A gun report will turn their attention to this place. The moment you step outside, you'll make yourself a target. You'd better resign yourself to it, Mr. Moon Man—you're caught."

The silver masked man did not speak.

Layne went on suavely: "An impasse. Either of us might shoot. I believe, though, that you will hardly turn your gun upon a defenseless woman. Mr. Moon Man. That makes your fate all the more certain. Maris, hurry over to your father. Tell him I have the Moon Man dead to rights. But before she goes, Mr. Moon Man—simply to eliminate the last possible doubt that you're finished—just remove your mask."

Still the robed being did not move. A scowl darkened Quinn Layne's face. He repeated with a whip-lash snap: "I say, remove it!"

At that instant, with dumbfounding suddenness, the room went utterly dark.

BLACKNESS engulfed Mark Keanan. The library, until that moment clearly visible through the magic sheen of the Moon Man's mask, completely disappeared. No gleam of light was left, except the faint rainbow shine from the Japanese lanterns festooning the Meads' grounds. As swiftly as the gloom closed down, Keanan's tortuously tight nerves threw him into action. He sprang out of the closet, leaped aside, flung himself into a desperate run.

He heard something hiss through the air. The whizz stopped with a solid thump. Keanan sensed that something had been thrown through the darkness, had struck Quinn Layne's back. He heard breath explode from Layne's lungs, sensed Layne staggering. A stifled scream broke from Maris Mead's lips. Keanan's one frantic thought was escape from the house. He bounded to the French doors, thrust them aside, sped out —into clutching arms.

The strength of an unseen man closed him in. Muscles bunched hard against him as the arms lifted him from his feet. He felt himself dragged into the shadows of a garden. Invisible hands fastened upon the globular mask. While one man held him breathlessly helpless, a second whisked the globe off his head. He stared up, gasping. He saw, dimly, a rugged, battered face—Ned Dargan's. It was Dargan who was crushing Keanan down. Next Keanan glimpsed a floating, silver sphere. It already was masking the features of the second man. Then Dargan's hoarse whisper startled Keanan:

"Quit fighting! Let go of that robe! It's your only chance of getting clear!"

The black cloak was whipped upward over Keanan's head. He tottered when Dargan's arms loosened. The robe was jerked completely off him. A thrust sent Keanan staggering across the soft earth of the garden. Twining vines tripped him. He sprawled down, dazed. Immediately he began clawing up. Blinking, overwhelmed with puzzlement, he saw a spectral figure darting through the darkness.

The Moon Man!

Inside the library, Quinn Layne mouthed an oath. He dragged himself up from the rug, groping through blinding gloom. His foot rolled upon something smooth and cone-shaped— a bottle. It was the missile that had twirled through the darkness and struck him on the back. The force of its impact had flung him down stunned. He swayed up, still gripping the automatic, ignoring Maris Mead's whimpered fear.

He blurted: "Get McEwen, Maris! The Moon Man's somewhere on the grounds! I'll kill that dirty crook—"

He heard the sound of running footfalls. It drew him to the French windows. But, peering out, he saw nothing. Mark Keanan was standing in gloomy shadow, invisible to Layne. Bewildered, Layne turned back. "The lights!" he snarled. "Somebody pulled the switch!" He began feeling his way toward the entrance of the hall. His extended hand struck a flat surface. The door was closed. He jerked it open, intending to run to the fuse-box in the pantry. He brought up short, blurting his dismay, a blinding glare beating into his eyes.

Brilliant flame was leaping up in the hallway, thickening the air with choking smoke. The fumes clouded over Layne, pouring stifling pungency into his working lungs. In the swirling mist the leaping tongues of fire seemed to be filling the whole hall. Layne turned back. Dismay again brought a shout from his stinging throat. Not only in the corridor, but at every window in the library, flames were roaring.

The flickering light played into Layne's drawn face. It pictured terror. Eye-baffling vapor was closing him in from all sides. He heard a call of alarm from Maris Mead, but he could not see her. He began groping through the glowing, suffocating fog. He burst out:

"The whole house is going!"

At the rear of the grounds, a ghostly figure with a silver head was huddling into the disappearing shadows. Steve Thatcher, after wresting the regalia from Keanan with Dargan's aid, had quickly donned the robe and mask. His heart sped with the realization that his black cloak was evidence now connecting him directly with the murder of Homer Henshaw. The finger of guilt was pointing even more directly at the Moon Man. Hunched against the hedge, his globular mask gleaming, he peered toward the flames leaping around the walls of Maris Meads' home.

THE glare was arousing shouts and cries of alarm from the guests of the lawn-party on the other side of the hedge.

"Fire! Turn in an alarm! *Fire!*" Men and women began running through the gate. Their approach increased the danger to the Moon Man, but he kept his position, watching the rear door of the house through the swelling smoke.

His muffled voice directed Ned Dargan, who was hunched at his side: "Get out of sight, Angel! There's nothing more you can do to help. It's a hundred to one shot, but—" His shining head lifted. "Layne! Layne's coming out! Find cover, Angel! The rest is up to me!"

His signal sent Dargan scampering along the hedge, toward the rear of the grounds. He raised like a sprinter poised for the gun. Through the glaze of his spherical mask he peered at a vague figure moving in the glaring fumes. Quinn Layne had hurried from the rear door of the house. He was running along the path carrying a strange collection of articles in his arms. As though frantic to escape observation, he loped toward the garage—unaware that the eyes of the Moon Man were upon him.

The Moon Man darted from the shadow. He trailed Layne quietly. Risking discovery by McEwen's men, he drifted to a stop behind Layne. A chuckle echoed within his hollow mask as he noted the articles in Layne's arms—a pair of candlesticks, several framed etchings, several books, a jewel case. With desperate haste Layne was opening the trunk on the rear of a sedan. He was hurriedly placing the strange assortment of articles inside when the muffled voice of the Moon Man sounded:

"You've betrayed yourself, Layne. It's not my finish tonight. It's yours!"

Layne spun, wide-eyed. Wildly he grabbed at his sagging coat pocket—a pocket which, the Moon Man knew, contained a gun. The Moon Man leaped forward. His black-covered fist shot out. It cracked squarely to the point of Layne's chin. Layne staggered, head uplifted. He thumped against the open trunk, sprawled to the gravel. The shining head of the Moon Man turned. He saw a man running waveringly toward him—Mark Keanan.

A rasping shout carried above the babble of the excited crowd: "The Moon Man! There! Shoot that mask off his head!" It was McEwen's driving tone. *"Stop him!"*

A sharp crack followed. Invisible lightning flashed past the Moon Man's mask—a bullet. Instantly he flung himself away, running at a crouch. He drove toward the hedge. Deliberately he maneuvered to place himself behind the crowd collecting at the gate, in order to force McEwen's marksman to withhold fire. He scurried through the shadows with the speed of a rabbit. Now the flare of the fire was diminishing. The returning darkness brought the Moon Man shelter. He cut through the greenery, disappeared with the completeness of a melting ghost.

McEwen's bellow again: "Close him in! The Moon Man! Corner him!"

McEwen had rushed from the upper floor of Curtis Mead's home at the first flash of fire from the next house. Suspecting it was a maneuver of the Moon Man, he had hurried across the lawn. One short glimpse he had caught of the Moon Man's gleaming mask, but that was all. Now, trotting through the garden of Maris Mead's home, gun in hand, he saw his men scattering into the search. And, in the garage, he saw Mark Keanan bending over the unconscious Quinn Layne.

A patrolman came trotting to McEwen's side as he paused. "Lieutenant! That house is not on fire at all. It isn't even scorched. All that glare came from some flares planted around it—part of the fireworks that were going to be used for the party. It certainly looked like the place was going up in smoke, but they're all out now!"

Two other patrolmen, rifles ready, broke through the hedge. A moment later a lithe figure leaped after them—Steve Thatcher. Thatcher's long strides carried him to McEwen's side. His face was white, anxious. One of the patrolmen blurted:

"The Moon Man was right around here, lieutenant, but he's gone now—now! He ducked in somewhere and didn't

come out. That damned crook must be a spook! There's no way he could have gotten away from us, but he did!"

McEwen was choking with anger. Unable to answer, he was staring down at Mark Keanan. Keanan had one knee planted on Quinn Layne's chest. He had fumbled from the car trunk some of the articles which Quinn had rescued from the apparently burning house. He had a jewel case in his hands. Unceremoniously he had dumped out of it glittering bracelets, ear-rings, brooches. He was tearing the lining from the lid. He rose with a slip of green paper in his hands—a cancelled check.

"There's the goods on Layne!" he blurted exultantly. "Extortion! This is the evidence to prove it. There's the killer you've been looking for, Gil—the rat who murdered Homer Henshaw!"

IN his office in police headquarters, Detective Sergeant Steve Thatcher stood behind the closed door, tightly holding the telephone. The excitement at the Mead's affair had culminated in the removal of Quinn Layne to the chief's office. Thatcher had taken part in the questioning of Layne, but had hurried to his desk at the sound of a bell. Over the telephone line Ned Dargan's voice came:

"All safe, Boss! While the cops were searching the grounds I hid in the rear of Curtis Mead's sedan. Nobody spotted me. First chance I saw, I slipped out. Gosh, Boss, I'm glad you made it!"

"Excellent work, Angel," Thatcher murmured. "Now, keep under cover. I think our job is just about done."

Smiling, he left the telephone, stepped into the chief's office. It was crowded. Peter Thatcher was there, Gil McEwen, Mark Keanan, Curtis Mead, his daughter, Quinn Layne, and Sue McEwen. Mead was glowering at Layne, saying to McEwen:

"He deliberately duped my daughter, lieutenant. While she was dancing with some one else at the Colony Club, he was able to slip away long enough to get to Henshaw's place. His duplicity is infamous. I'll exert every influence to see that he pays the full penalty."

On the chief's desk lay the assortment of articles which Mark Keanan had seized. Steve Thatcher had seen them yield vital evidence against Layne. A raised check had been found inside the tubes of each of the pair of candlesticks. Others had been concealed in the covers of the books, and in the backing of the framed etchings. He had learned that Layne had presented these things to Maris Mead as gifts. In this way he contrived to hide the checks—not only evidence but means of bleeding his victims further—in a place where they might never be sought.

Keanan's eyes shone with triumph, yet his face was wan with anxiety. "You know the whole story now, Gil," he said quietly. "I'm the man who took the robe and mask out of the chief's safe, twice. I had to work under cover for Neil's sake—that's all. I guess it breaks me off the force."

Curtis Mead answered: "Considering, sergeant, that you've solved an important case, and saved many good men from being bled, we can forgive you. In your place we all would have done the same thing. We'll keep this to ourselves, and you'll continue as before on the force. I think congratulations are due you."

Keanan's head wagged. "Not me," he said. "The Moon Man—the real Moon Man. He was right in the middle of it. He got the robe and mask back from me and pulled off the job that forced Layne to betray himself. It was the Moon Man who got the flares out of the garage and set them off. His plan worked—to make Layne think the place was on fire, so Layne would try to save those checks. I saw him knock Layne cold just before he disappeared. I guess it's still my job to help send the Moon Man to the chair if he's grabbed, but—thanks to him!"

McEwen could only growl. Steve Thatcher, smiling tightly, turned away. Sue McEwen followed him into the corridor. She caught his hands, looked into his face with eyes brimming with happiness.

"Steve!" she whispered. "It's all clear

now, perfectly. I love you twice as much for having doubted you, because it's proved how good you are. It was so horrible, but now it's all over . . . . Can you ever forgive me, Steve?"

He took her in his arms. He held her close, a soft laugh breaking from his throat. "Of course, darling," he said quietly. "We'll forget it. Right now, Sue, I have to hurry away. There's something I must do. I'll see you soon, darling. Wait for me at home, will you?"

Steve Thatcher's purpose took him in his roadster to the home of Curtis Mead. Now the party was over, the grounds were cleared and dark. Thatcher approached quietly, entered the gloomy gardens, and moments later drove away. On his return trip, he carried the priceless regalia of the Moon Man securely locked in the rumble compartment of the car.

During the confusion of the "fire" he had found a hiding place for the robe and mask—which had not yielded its secret to the searching police—in one of the large, varicolored Japanese lanterns.

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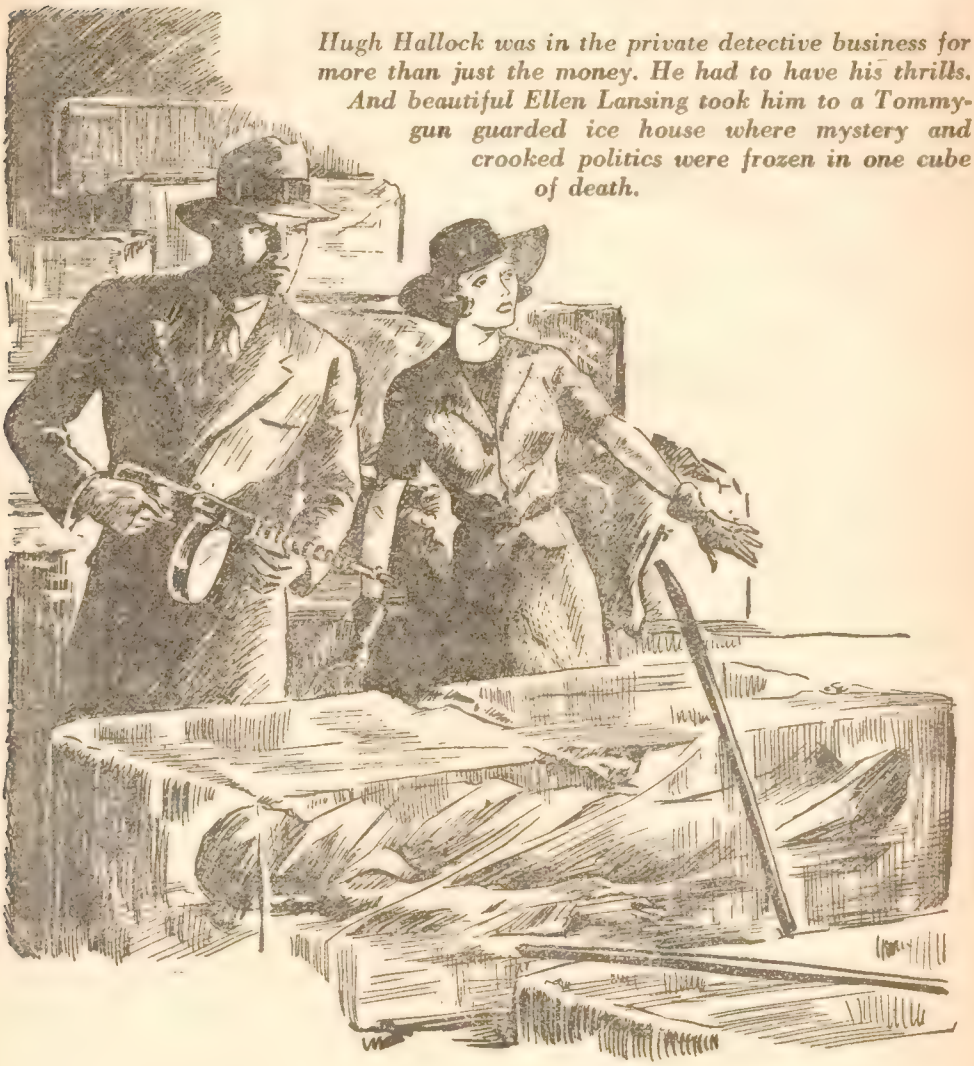
# Death's Ice-House



*Hugh Hallock was in the private detective business for more than just the money. He had to have his thrills. And beautiful Ellen Lansing took him to a Tommy-gun guarded ice house where mystery and crooked politics were frozen in one cube of death.*

## *By Paul Chadwick*

**Author of "Murder Bride," etc.**

HUGH HALLOCK squinted at the set white face of the girl who sat beside him on the station wagon's seat. She was driving recklessly. The night was wet and black and the battered headlights pushed mere flickering cones of orange into the mist along the highway. But Ellen Lansing was holding the big car close to fifty, making it hurtle over the road as though a thousand devils were chasing it.

Her face was masklike under the thin wash of the instrument-board bulb. She was scared, excited, determined—just as she had been when she'd come running into his office twenty minutes before.

Hallock wished he knew more about her. He hoped grimly that she wasn't playing him for some sort of sap. She had given her name, told him she wanted to hire him as a bodyguard in a certain deal she was undertaking.

She had laid five dollars on his desk, promised to pay him the rest of his fee in installments out of her nurse's salary—and he had caught her up on that. It didn't take any super-dick to see that she was wearing the uniform of a probationer in the city hospital under her coat. He'd get gray-haired if he waited to collect from her earnings.

But she'd given him no time to consider. It had been a case of yes or no—and Hugh Hallock had said yes. There was something wistful, something faintly heroic about the girl herself—like a small, fluffy kitten with its feet braced firmly and its claws ready, putting up a swell front against superior forces. And Hugh Hallock was in the private detective business for more than just the money. He had to have his thrills.

The girl braked suddenly, and Hallock slewed forward, almost knocking his chin against the windshield. He straightened, clutched at the side of the seat, and saw that the girl was peering ahead through the arc of the wiper. He muttered complainingly:

"Another loop like that, sister, and you won't be wanting a bodyguard—you'll need a doctor."

She said in a thin scared voice: "I see a hill to the left, and there's a route junction marker just ahead. I think that means we're going to turn off the highway in a minute and pick somebody up."

Hugh Hallock shrugged. "You haven't told me where we're going—so I can't help you in the guesswork. But let me know when you want to start the roughstuff." He patted the side of his coat that held his automatic, then jabbed a cigarette between his lips and got it going.

The girl spoke quickly. "If I switch off the car lights in a hurry go for your gun. I—" her voice grew husky—"you might as well know now that what we're doing is terribly dangerous. I wouldn't have asked you to come—except that I was desperate." Her eyes locked with his a moment and he saw the look of sheer terror in their depths.

He said: "I'll take my chances on the danger—but if you're playing me for a sucker I might get sore."

She didn't answer, but took the right fork of the highway and drove with her body tilted sidewise and her head thrust around the edge of the windshield. In a moment she twisted the wheel sharply and the car bumped into a rutted country road.

Hallock caught sight of mud and scrub pines and wet blueberry bushes. A flashlight winked directly ahead and the girl jammed home the brakes a second time. Hallock's fingers tightened over the gun in his pocket.

Ellen Lansing whispered warningly: "That's only my father's hired man. This is where I telephoned him to meet us so he could help us later. We're going to need every bit of help we can get."

Hallock saw a thickset old man shuffle into the glow of the headlights. He had a red face, china-blue eyes and piglike white bristles around his flabby jaws. There was a pair of ice tongs, a crowbar and a large piece of canvas slung over his back. He stopped and squinted at Hallock sharply, then jerked his thumb toward the black, wet stillness of the woods. "Better go back, Miss Ellen! I've heard 'em working in there fer the past ten minutes. You're too late, and it'd be too risky."

"I won't go back! We've got to stop them!" the girl cried. "You're not afraid are you, Bradley?"

The old man spoke in a frightened mumble. "You—you said yourself they were killers!"

"I know—but that's why I hired a detective and brought him with me. He's armed—and so am I." She reached down in a pocket of the car and produced a small nickel-plated revolver. "There can't be many of them, Bradley. We've got to drive them off."

"They'll hear this auto," the man said nervously.

"Yes. I'll only go in a hundred yards farther. Then I'll park and we'll go the

rest of the way on foot. Have you seen any tracks, Bradley?"

"No, they must have come in by the other road, Miss Ellen."

She nodded and the old man climbed into the back of the station wagon. The girl started forward again, and Hallock didn't speak till she'd parked in a clearing beside the wood road and switched out the car lights. Then he said: "I'd like to know what it's all about before the fighting starts. I don't want to flip a slug at the wrong person."

Ellen Lansing stood close to him in the wet darkness, so close that he could feel her trembling, and feel the coldness of her hand. She said hoarsely: "There isn't time to explain things now in detail. We've got to hurry. We're going up against some criminals who are trying to steal something I must have."

"Isn't it a pretty big order, expecting me to act on faith?"

"It is, but—" the girl's shaking fingers reached for his. She held onto him an instant as though his mere presence there in the darkness gave her strength. "I'm in a tough spot, Mr. Hallock. This is my only chance to pull out. Help me, won't you—and keep your questions till later?"

Listening to her voice, feeling the trusting pressure of her small, cold hand, Hallock knew he was going to be a sap and do what she wanted, even though he might be heading his neck for a piece of rope. It wouldn't be the first time a dame had made a fool of him. He said a little grumblingly:

"O.K. What next?"

"They're not expecting us," she said. "We'll try to surprise them. We've got to drive them away at any cost."

She switched on a flashlight for a moment, found the road, and, holding her nickel-plated revolver firmly, started into the woods. Hallock followed, the shuffling form of the old man beside him. Bradley was silent, but Hallock saw a glint of fear in his eyes.

They had gone fifty feet when Ellen Lansing stopped again.

"Listen," she said. "I can hear them."

HALLOCK caught a metallic scraping, alternating with a thumping noise coming out of the night. He waited a moment, then touched Ellen Lansing's shoulder and spoke in a quick whisper in her ear.

"This is the lowdown, as I get it! These men, whoever they are, are grabbing something you're after. You want them cleared out so you and Bradley can do your stuff?"

"Yes, that's it."

"O.K. Then let me handle it. I'll go ahead alone."

"There may be several of them. They—they'll try to kill you!"

"I heard you say they weren't expecting us," said Hallock. "I'll scout ahead and see what surprise will do."

Before she could stop him or protest, Hallock pushed past her. The muddy road was clogged with wet pine needles and made a sound-proof mat. But he couldn't see a yard ahead. He used his flashlight, shading the lens with his fingers, till a faint glimmer off among the pine trunks to the right warned him to be more careful. He felt for the ruts in the road in total darkness and worked his way cautiously forward.

Then he saw what the glimmer was. Some sort of big building, with light seeping through a half-open door. He started to glide toward it, but thought better of it as a small, red spark glowed in the darkness about a hundred and fifty feet away.

The spark moved, and Hallock flattened. It was a cigarette held in the lips or fingers of a solitary watcher.

Hallock thought a moment. Supposing the girl was up to something shady, and these men were police? He stood in bad with the department already because of his rough-and-ready tactics. A few more slips and he'd have his license taken from him and find himself in jail.

He edged away from the spark. Moving stealthily, he crept in a wide circle toward the half open door through which the light was coming. The faint dripping of the wet pine needles helped to cover his movements. He got a glimpse inside the

building and saw what it was. An ice house, huge and black and silent. The faint lapping of near-by water told that it stood on the edge of a pond.

Then he got a glimpse of two men working energetically in the blue-white glow of an acetylene lantern. He watched for several seconds, convincing himself there were only these two and the one outside in the dark. They were digging in the ice cakes, scraping layers of sawdust away, chipping and tugging among the blocks.

He saw rainbow ice crystals geyser up and fall. The ice in the big storage house was low, hardly more than a residue left over from another season. Weeds in the road that Hallock had followed indicated that the house hadn't been used this year.

But he was more interested in the men than the building. He couldn't see their faces clearly, but they weren't dressed in uniform. They didn't look like detectives either. He edged still closer, got a suggestion of ugly, underworld features, furtive and predatory as rats. He knew the breed, and suddenly felt better. At the same time he realized he was on dangerous ground. There was the crimson, smoldering eye of the cigarette off in the darkness to his left. That belonged to a guard who'd been posted. He was risking a bullet in his back, prowling around so close.

He gripped the butt of his automatic, debated a moment, balanced on the balls of his feet. Then he turned and moved stealthily toward the cigarette glow. It was still there, out away from the northeast corner of the building, where the other road that Bradley had mentioned apparently came in. That meant probably that a car was parked there waiting.

Hallock maneuvered in another wide circle, out in the pinewoods, slipping through trees and bushes, till he got the glow from the open door behind the silent watcher. He held his breath. The man was lugging the snubbed barrel and round drun of a sinister sub-machine gun. Hallock's neck felt cold when he thought how nearly he had run into that. Only the faint glow of a cigarette had warned him.

Keeping the man between himself and the lighted doorway, he crept closer still, his automatic ready. He saw the front part of a big car parked in another roadway. The man with the gun stood negligently close to this.

Hallock narrowed the distance alertly. Then the old man, Bradley, somewhere off in the darkness, decided for him what his action would be. For there came a distinct metallic clank out of the wet woods as Bradley carelessly hit his crowbar against his tongs.

Hallock saw the lounging man with the rapid firer snap into alertness. His cigarette bobbed down, then dropped. The nose of the sub-caliber weapon rose from a forty-five degree slant to horizontal. The man called softly to his companions:

"Chuck! Hey, Chuck!"

THE sound of work in the ice house stopped. Two hulking shadows converged toward the door, one of them holding up the acetylene lantern.

In the brief instant before some change in the doorway light blotted his perfect silhouette of the waiting gunman, Hugh Hallock raised his automatic and fired. He shot with calculation, aiming at the round disclike ammunition chamber of the Tommy-gun, close to where the man's finger gripped the butt.

The heavy .45 slug spanged on metal and the gunman gave a cry of surprise and pain. The weapon literally jumped from his fingers. He stumbled back as his two companions inside the ice house ran out shooting as they came.

Hugh Hallock leaped straight forward, risking a blind shot, knowing that the others didn't realize yet what the racket was all about. In a sweeping forward dash, he snatched the Tommy from the ground. He was away into the dark, trailing the gun behind him, before the man in front of the big car knew what had happened.

But a flashlight stabbed behind him, slanting across his face for a moment, and a fusilade of shots broke out. Hugh Hallock flung himself flat on the cold wet ground as a half dozen slugs clipped through the bushes above him. He holstered his own gun, then turned deliber-

ately and snaked his finger through the trigger guard of the Tommy. He pumped a wide swath of random shots into the night.

He heard a window crash in the parked car, heard cries of terror. He turned the gun's snout in a different direction and pumped again. The night was made hideous with its clatter.

Doors slammed and the starter on the parked car whined like a being in torment. The engine coughed, thundered. Lights speared on suddenly, then winked off again. The car lurched madly ahead.

Guns blazed from its windows and bullets whined through the pines around Hugh Hallock's head. He fired back, aiming high purposely. These three might deserve killing, but it wasn't part of his plan to involve himself in murder. He had accomplished what he'd set out to do—driven the strangers off.

Their car, following the other road, was speeding away into the darkness, its headlights on again, already screened by the trees.

Hallock stopped firing and stood listening till the sounds of the car entirely disappeared. He waited another two minutes then called softly: "Miss Lansing! Bradley!"

Off to the left a scared voice immediately answered. "You—you're all right, Mr. Hallock?"

"Yeah, come on!"

They came up to him, the girl and the old man, both tense with apprehension. "I—I thought you'd been killed surely," said Ellen Lansing. Hallock played his flashlight on her and saw that her eyes were big and scared.

"There was some lead slung but nobody got hurt," he said. "I got this keepsake though!" He tapped the Tommy-gun. "When I drove them away those guys were empty-handed. I guess they didn't get whatever they came after!"

She looked relieved and frightened at the same time and said: "Then, let's hurry!"

Hallock followed wonderingly while Ellen Lansing and the old man hurried forward. They went up to the big ice house flashing their lights. Hallock stumbled on the acetylene lantern that those who had fled had dropped in their excitement. He got it going again, and it illumined the inside of the big building weirdly.

There were huge piles of wet sawdust heaped around, and a layer of ice almost six feet thick still unmelted. The unknown gunmen had been digging in this and had made a sizeable excavation toward the center.

Ellen Lansing stepped up to the hole, and Hallock saw a look on her face as though she were battling an inner feeling of repulsion. She said huskily to Bradley: "Bring the crowbar. What we're after must be here."

Hallock watched while the old man, tough and strong for all his years, went to work in the hole where the others had been digging. Bradley loosened an ice cake, got hold of it with his tongs and lifted it out. The girl trembled suddenly. Hallock started wide-eyed with horror. A dark blotch that looked like the body of a man showed dimly under a layer of ice.

It was a body. When Bradley had lifted two more cakes Hallock got a glimpse of a shrouded figure, stark and stiff, with frozen cloth plastered to it. He swore and stepped nearer and stared hard at the girl. But she wasn't looking at him. She was gazing in fascination at the figure in the ice.

Hallock came close, pushed Bradley aside and bent over the macabre form. The body was that of a man who had apparently been under the ice for some months. Hallock drew the frozen cloth away from the face of the corpse and caught his breath. The man's features had been battered as though in an accident; but Hallock recognized them and spoke a name.

"Jim Beaumont!"

He looked at Ellen Lansing again, and this time she nodded. "You knew him?"

"No," said Hallock, "but every dick in the country has got his mug on file. He's the playboy gambler who was smashed up last fall in an auto accident. He's the guy whose body was snatched from a mortuary chapel. The 'Disappearing Corpse,' the tabloids called him. His family offered

five thousand berries to anyone who would locate his body. I never could figure myself why crooks wasted time kidnaping a stiff when there are so many live guys to be grabbed. You tell me the answer."

ELLEN LANSING said, still stalling: "We've got to hurry! Those others will be back. They'll want to stop what I'm trying to do. You don't know how ruthless the man behind this is!"

"I know you've got to give me a little real dope soon, sister, or you'll drive me nuts. I'm supposed to be a detective, not a guy in a guessing game."

"I'll tell you all about it, but—" She motioned with a shudder to the still form at their feet. "We must get him away. Will you help Bradley load him aboard when I get the wagon?"

Hallock nodded. The girl brought the station wagon up, and Bradley and Hallock carried the frozen corpse out to it and loaded it in, covering it with the canvas Bradley had brought.

Ellen Lansing insisted on driving again. They lurched off over the wood road with their macabre passenger bobbing and rattling in back. Hallock said, exercising his own memory out loud:

"The night Beaumont smashed himself up he'd got drunk at Ormand Sanky's night club. I wonder if Sanky's mixed up in this? If so, you're playing with dynamite sure enough, sister. Sanky's more than just a crooked confidence guy and gambler. He's a political big shot with wires reaching all the way to city hall. He's too high to get at. The wise guys are saying he bumped off those two rodmen who were picked up in a ditch this afternoon, but the cops are going easy. They know Sanky's hard to touch."

"He's a devil!" the girl said suddenly, her voice tight and bitter.

"Then it is Sanky. But I'm darned if I see how he connects with this frozen stiff you've got. Even Sanky's worst enemies never hinted he was a body snatcher—and why should he want to grab a corpse, anyway?"

She didn't answer, and Hallock added: "You'll have a lot of explaining to do when you go to Beaumont's family to claim the reward."

"The reward doesn't interest me," she said quickly. "There's something more important I've got to do."

"And you're not ready to let me into the secret?"

"No, not yet."

Hallock lapsed into troubled silence while she drove the car with its strange load through the night. The lights of houses appeared presently. They were close to the suburbs, and in a moment Ellen Lansing turned in through the gate of an abandoned farm. She seemed to know the spot. She guided the big station wagon behind an old barn out of sight of the road.

There was no indecision about her movements now. She hopped down from the driver's seat and said to Hallock: "I want you and Bradley to wait here. The rest of the job is up to me—but if I'm not back by midnight open this letter, read it, and then take it to the police." She handed Hallock an envelope which she had apparently prepared before she'd come to his office. "Until midnight, you just stay here and keep watch over Beaumont's body."

Bradley, obviously in the habit of obeying her orders, settled back to wait. Hallock pocketed the letter, neither agreeing nor refusing to do what she said. She'd strained his curiosity and his patience almost to the breaking point. But she seemed to take his silence to mean consent. She hurried out of the gate and off along the road.

Bradley said dully: "Her pa's farm is down the pike a piece. She's got another car there."

Hallock asked: "Do you know where she's going and what she intends to do with Beaumont's body?"

Bradley shifted his eyes uneasily toward the back of the station wagon with its silent form. "Don't know," he said. "Never heard of this feller Beaumont. Don't read the papers much. Can't figure what she's up to. But she always was independent—and she's been the boss around the place since her pa went to prison. Now the farm's gonna be sold fer

debts. I reckon that's why Miss Ellen took up nursing."

Hallock leaned forward. "Prison! Look here—is her dad Stanley Lansing, the alderman they jugged?"

"Yeah, that's him! He was in politics in the city and they said he stole a lot of money. I don't believe it. I've worked fer Stan Lansing, man and boy. But he was sent to the penitentiary. He's there yet, and will be I guess fer a heap of time to come."

Hallock swore. "Her father was hounded by Sanky's bunch at the trial. I wonder—" He stopped, then lifted his flashlight and stared at the letter. It's blank envelope was a challenge. He said suddenly to Bradley: "You stay here. I'm going around to the front to close the gate. Somebody might come in off the road.

As soon as he was out of Bradley's sight, he raised his flash and opened the letter. It contained a sheet of hastily typewritten paper with the name of the city hospital across the top, and was signed by Ellen Lansing. It said:

*To Whom it May Concern:* Red Shafflin, one of the gunmen left in a ditch this afternoon was still alive when the police found him, and he was brought to this hospital where I work. Shafflin talked in his delirium while I was alone with him, and I know why he was tortured and shot.

He and his pal were trying to blackmail Ormand Sanky. Sanky murdered them to stop it. They thought they had the whip hand over Sanky in connection with the snatching of Beaumont's body a few months back. Sanky was behind that, but had ordered them to bury the body in unslaked lime. Instead, they hid it in the old ice house at Deerfoot Pond.

They knew that Sanky had given Beaumont liquor poisoned with acetate of lead. Sanky wanted to kill Beaumont to prevent his collecting some gambling debts. The poisoned liquor blinded Beaumont, made him dizzy, and brought about the smash-up. Then Sanky had the body snatched when there was some talk of an autopsy.

After hiding Beaumont's body, Shafflin and his pal waited a while and then tried to scare Sanky into paying them hush money. Instead of paying, Sanky tortured them into telling where the body was. And then had them killed.

I'm taking this opportunity to make Sanky right the terrible wrong he did my father. Father was railroaded to prison to take the rap for one of Sanky's political allies in the city bond-fraud scandal. I'm going to make Sanky confess and free father, by threatening to turn Beaumont's body over to the police. But in case I don't come back I want the police notified. The reward offered by Beaumont's family for the return of the body can be used to pay the fee of the detective I'm hiring, and the rest can be turned over to my sister who's working her way through school.

There was a cold feeling along Hallock's back when he read the last paragraph of the letter. It was plain that Ellen Lansing knew what danger she was facing. Hallock swore and folded the letter quickly, stuffing it in his pocket. One girl was going up against a vicious rat like Ormand Sanky. One girl was trying to outsmart the smartest big shot crook in the city.

Hallock knew she wouldn't make it. He saw holes in her plan already. There'd been no other witnesses to the dying confession Red Shafflin had made. It was only Ellen Lansing's word. And her dad, in the sight of the public and before the law itself, was a jailbird. He was doing time now for the crime for which he'd been sentenced. Ellen Lansing could hardly be called unbiased. Sanky's mouthpiece would tear her evidence to pieces, make her look like a fool. If she got too unruly, Sanky might take steps . . . .

It was the thought of what might happen to the girl herself that made Hallock turn and run back to the station wagon, and the waiting Bradley. Hallock felt responsible suddenly for this fighting, nervy little kid who was heading straight for disaster.

HE walked back to Bradley quickly. "Pop, look here! We can't just wait around while Miss Lansing gets herself hurt. She's going back to the city to try to drive a bargain with Ormand Sanky. She's liable to get burned."

"Huh?"

"I opened that letter of hers. I didn't dare wait because I figured she was headed for trouble. She's gonna try to outsmart one of the smartest croks this side of Hades."

"You mean she'll likely get shot?"

"Anything's liable to happen where she's going."

Bradley grunted and looked mournful. "She told us to stay here and keep watch o' the body anyway."

"I don't care what she told us. She's off her nut."

"I reckon we'll have to stay," said Bradley. "She took the key to the car with her when she went."

Hallock's answer to that was to lift up the hood of the station wagon and do a trick with the ignition. He got the engine going under Bradley's surprised eyes. "Get in," said Hallock. "We ought to catch her just about as she's leaving the farm. You'll have to point it out to me."

"You can't stop her," said Bradley, "once she's made up her mind."

"I'm not going to stop her. I'm going to follow her and be handy when I'm needed."

They bumped out of the yard. Hallock drove for ten minutes, then Bradley pointed. "That's her dad's place now. There's a light out by the garage, so I reckon she hasn't left."

Hallock pulled off to one side of the road, shut off the motor and switched out the lights. "Keep quiet!" he cautioned.

He waited till a small roadster left the yard of the farm ahead. Ellen Lansing wasn't expecting them to follow, and she didn't look around.

Hallock didn't start up again till the tail-light of her roadster was a red blur far down the road. Then he followed, keeping her car in sight. She went straight into the city, drove down a long avenue, turned right on a cross street, and came to a stop before the big residence of Ormand Sanky.

Hallock stopped the station wagon a block away and told Bradley to wait in it. He took off his light raglan, threw it over the Tommy-gun, and carried the coat and the weapon over his left arm. His right hand was free to go for his automatic if he needed it.

SANKY'S house had spacious grounds around it. Hallock was a master at tailing and gumshoe work. He let Ellen Lansing get a start on him, let her enter the front gate of the house and climb the steps, while he took advantage of a patch of shadow to vault over the fence. He worked around to a window while she gained admittance by the door.

Then Hallock crouched behind an ornamental shrub. He fidgeted, cursing the delay, while the dim figure of a patroling gunman strolled toward him across the lawn.

A moment passed. Hallock sprang swiftly, silently, bringing his automatic crashing down on the head of the unsuspecting guard. He made sure the man was out for the next half hour, dragged his inert body into the shrubbery, and edged on toward the window. It was too high for him to reach. But there was a sleeping porch at the side of the house, and Hallock tackled this. It was locked.

He took out a jackknife, cut a square hole in the screening, reached in and drew back the catch. A window opening onto the porch was unfastened, and in a moment Hallock had raised it and stepped inside.

He knew the risk he was running in entering the house of Ormand Sanky. He'd had an example tonight of the sort of tactics Sanky used. Those rodmen in the pine woods were Sanky's men. But he couldn't let the girl, who was his client, come into this murderer's den alone.

A moment later he heard Sanky talking; heard a smooth, oily voice that set his teeth on edge. He heard Ellen Lansing, too, tense, combative, though he couldn't make out yet what either of them was saying. They were in the next room with a roller door between.

Hallock edged toward this, knowing that the two inside were wrapped up in their own conversation. He inched the door softly open, slid his eyes along the crack.

Sanky, a tall, thin, snakily limber man, was standing before an ornate mantle. Ellen Lansing was a few feet from him, trembling as she spoke her piece.

"It's a showdown," she was saying. "I know, and a lot of others know, what you did to father. And now I've got a chance to make you come clean. If you don't sign a full confession of what you did to dad,

I'll turn Beaumont's body over to the cops, together with Red Shafflin's dying statement."

For a moment Sanky's suave, oily face seemed to start and strain. He said: "This is amazing, Miss Lansing! I wasn't aware that Shafflin was in any condition to make a statement when he reached the hospital. The papers said he was unconscious, dying."

"He was delirious—and I heard him talk."

"You were alone with him, I take it?"

"Yes, but—"

"And you come here trying to threaten me with the babbling of a delirious man which only yourself heard!"

"It was more than babbling," she said fiercely. "He told where Jim Beaumont's body was hidden. I proved the truth of what he said by going and digging it up. I have it now—the corpse of the man you poisoned with acetate of lead. I've got you cornered!"

Sanky took a step forward, his long face hunched between his vulturelike shoulders, and Ellen Lansing spoke quickly, with a note of terror in her voice. "Don't think it will do any good to threaten me or kill me! I've left instructions for the body of Beaumont to reach the police if I don't come back."

"You misunderstand me, Miss Lansing. I have no intention of threatening you, or —er—killing you, as you so childishly put it." Sanky laughed softly. "I shall bring suit against you for coming here to slander and try to intimidate me with your preposterous threats!"

Hallock, watching, saw the girl's face turn still whiter. He heard her gasp.

"You wouldn't dare bring the police into this," she cried. "I have Beaumont's corpse, I tell you. An autopsy will show that he was poisoned. Everyone knows he left your night club just before he died. It's plain now why you had his body stolen."

"Are you in a position to prove," said Sanky softly, "that I had anything to do with the snatching of the body?"

"No, but there is the poison—"

"You expect to show, of course, that that poison was administered by me?"

"Shafflin said—I heard him—"

"Red Shafflin was a notorious underworld character whose word wouldn't be believed on oath. You were the only one who heard him—and you as the daughter of a felon serving sentence are not in a very enviable position to be believed. If there's poison in Beaumont's body, it will be your job to explain it—not mine."

Ellen Lansing made a sound like a sob. Then suddenly she snatched at her dress and drew out her nickel-plated revolver which she leveled at Sanky. "You've murdered men! You railroaded my father to prison! You're going to confess!"

She didn't see the swift-footed servant enter until it was too late. Hallock dared not warn her for fear she'd lose her head and get badly hurt. The man slipped up behind her and snatched away the gun she had aimed at Sanky.

Sanky said smoothly: "Nice work, Druker. Now, if you'll just phone the police."

Hallock made his play then, before Sanky could finish or the crook servant could act. He rolled back the sliding door and catapulted himself into the room.

The servant tried to wheel on Hallock and fire, using the girl's revolver. Hallock struck it down with the coat-covered muzzle of the Tommy-gun, then struck a swift blow with his left hand at the servant. The servant cried out, ducked and tried to lash back. Hallock's second blow got him fairly on the button and floored him.

Sanky's hand was sliding beneath his coat, reaching for the gun he wore in a shoulder holster when Hallock whirled. Hallock's raglan, dropping away from the muzzle of the Tommy, stopped him. The wicked eye of the sub-caliber weapon was centered on Sanky's chest. For the first time that night Sanky turned white with terror. There was no argument against the threat of a sizzling stream of cupronickel slugs. But Sanky recovered himself and found his voice quickly. "I presume I owe the pleasure of this visit to Miss Lansing. No doubt you're a friend of hers."

The girl gasped: "Mr. Hallock! How did you get here? Why—"

"Hallock's the name, eh?" said Sanky softly. "You've been mixing up in this young lady's inane but desperate attempt to free her father.

"Shut up!" snapped Hallock, giving the Tommy-gun a closer jab toward Sanky. "It's true, wise guy, I'm mixed up in this lady's business. And I'm desperate as hell. You'll find out that if you start anything funny. If I have to bump you, I will. It will be one good way of stopping you from giving the lie to this kid's story."

Hallock gave that a second to sink in. Then he said: "Take your choice of being croaked or signing a full confession. You're going to tell how you railroaded Stanley Lansing to jail to take the rap for a skunk of yours, and how you dosed Jim Beaumont with lead poisoning. You're going to sign—or else get a bunch of hot slugs in your yellow belly." He turned to the girl. "Get a pen and a piece of paper, kid. There's a desk over there."

ELLEN LANSING obeyed, and wrote down as Hallock dictated.

*I, Ormand Sanky, hereby confess that I helped to make false charges against Stanley Lansing in order to clear a pal of mine. Lansing was innocent and was railroaded to jail through perjured evidence produced at my instigation.*

*I further confess that I murdered Jim Beaumont so that I would not have to pay him his winnings at gambling. An auto accident was the apparent cause of Beaumont's death, but what really killed him was lead poisoning.*

When Ellen Lansing had finished, Hallock told her to give the paper and pen to Sanky. "Sign it!" Hallock ordered.

A supercilious smile flitted across the face of Sanky. He stooped and signed the confession with a flourish, then returned the pen and paper to Ellen Lansing. He spoke with suave assurance and infinite malice. "If you weren't such imbeciles—both of you—in legal matters, you'd know that a confession obtained under threat of death or violence carries no weight in court. I have my servant here to prove that Hallock entered my house forcibly, and intimidated me into signing this confession. I shall repudiate it, of course, and declare that I had nothing whatever to do with Beaumont's poisoning."

Ellen Lansing looked startled.

Hallock nodded. "Sure, you'll repudiate it," he growled. "But—I figured on that!"

He turned to the girl suddenly, said: "Here, kid, take this Tommy-gun. All you gotta do is point it at this rat and jab the trigger if he starts to move. It will tear him to pieces."

He showed her how to hold it firmly. Then he went up and disarmed Sanky, slipping the gambler's gun into his own pocket. He turned on his heel abruptly, calling over his shoulder to Ellen Lansing: "Remember, give him the works, if he moves. I'll be right back."

He ran from the house to the spot where he'd parked the station wagon and drove it close to Sanky's steps. Bradley was still waiting and Hallock said to him: "Quick, pop—help me carry this stiff inside!"

Together they lifted the rigid body of Jim Beaumont and took it up the stoop into Sanky's hall. Ellen Lansing gasped in horror and Sanky stared in amazement when they brought it into the room where Sanky was standing and laid it at his feet.

"Meet your victim, fella!" Hallock pulled back the cloth and displayed the rigid, battered face. But Sanky's expression didn't change as he looked down. Even the sight of one of his victims left him unmoved.

He spoke harshly. "If, as you say, this man was poisoned, I repeat that it will be Miss Lansing's business to explain it. No doubt evidence will be found to show that her own father did it and she's trying to cover up."

"Sure, sure," said Hallock. "You'll try to pin that on her old man, too. You'll get that mouthpiece of yours to do his stuff."

"I'll see to it that any attempt on Miss Lansing's part to trace the poisoning of Beaumont to me becomes a boomerang against her."

"You signed the confession," said Hallock coldly.

"I told you I'd repudiate it as being made under duress." Sanky smiled evilly, knowing he had the upper hand, even with his signature on a confession and the dead body of his victim at his feet. His political power and connections with the "right people" made him feel that he could weather any storm.

Hallock suddenly drew out Sanky's gun and waved it. "I can get you on the Sullivan law for this!"

"On the contrary, I have a permit to carry that gun for my own protection."

"Yeah? Do the coppers know it?"

"Certainly. All pistol permits are registered with their department."

"*You're* telling *me!*" Before either the girl or Sanky sensed what he was planning, Hugh Hallock stooped down, pointed Sanky's gun and fired straight into the frozen head of Beaumont's corpse, letting the slug penetrate through an abrasion that the auto accident had made. Then he rose, wiped the gun carefully, and, holding it with his handkerchief, laid it on the table.

"That's the first time I ever shot a dead man, Sanky! And it's the first time I ever framed a piece of evidence in my life. But a guy's justified in doing what he can to trap a murdering rat like you who's as guilty as hell and a menace to society. Try to laugh that off!"

"You're crazy!" gasped Sanky.

"Like a fox!" said Hallock. He took the Tommy-gun into his own hands again grimly. "You're going to fry for the murder of Beaumont now anyway, Sanky! You're right—we couldn't prove you poisoned that guy with doctored liquor the night he was at your club. But the confession you signed is going to stand. Take the pen, Miss Lansing, and put *quotation marks* around the last two words. That's all that's needed.

"Get it, Sanky? You may claim Beaumont was killed in an auto accident, but I'll claim you hid in an alley and shot him and that the crack-up only looked like an accident. I'll point out that he was so banged up they missed finding the bullet. But I'll say that's why you snatched his body. And there'll be a slug from your own gun right in his head to prove it—the gun that you say even the coppers know you have. Of course, you can confess the truth to them if you want to—but I've got you either way. If a bullet in a guy's bean isn't 'Lead Poisoning,' Sanky, I'd like to know what is!"

*Watch for October*

TEN DETECTIVE ACES Out Sept. 4

*Snooty Piper decided that the latest corpse in Beantown did not die of "a cute" indigestion. But Snooty made a mistake, and learned that . . . .*

# Crime Does Not Play

## "Dizzy Duo" Yarn

*By Joe Archibald*

Author of "A Case of Grip," etc.

A VERY sensational bump-off takes place in Beantown one blithe afternoon in spring and the setting is quite an historical suburb called Concord. The house where it was pulled off is only about half a dozen doors from where "Little Women" was written which is quite like finding a slaughterhouse near an orchid nursery.

Me and Snooty Piper are in the Greek's when the news breaks, and the Greek's is very very far from Concord.

"Wh-e-ee, a murder!" hollers Snooty. "Boys, it's about time. I'm quite fed up with reporting chimney fires. Come on, Scoop!" He skids out in the street, calls a hack and leaps in. "Don't spare the gas, my man," he yells to the driver. "It is Concord we would like to go to—but it is not to attend a bridge, ha ha!"

"If that's a joke," the tough looking citizen who pilots the chariot growls, "I am a stand-in for Shoily Temple. Concord, huh? Who's going to pay for this ride, wise guy?"

"It is a Mr. Guppy," Snooty says quite nettled. "Not that it is any of your business. We are of the fourth estate and

are out to help apprehend criminals. Do you want to be arrested for obstructing justice, you—"

"Awright, awright," the mug says and the hack starts moving. I would like to be with Snooty Piper just once when he did not look for a fight.

We reach the scene of the crime in due time. It is quite a spiffy looking igloo surrounded by quite a mob of citizens and lots of big policemen. A very raucous sound is emanating from the interior of said palace as we barge onto the porch.

"Well, well, Iron Jaw is here, Scoop," Snooty says right away. "I can hear him whisperin' from out here. Shall we go in?"

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, as you may have heard, is called a detective. The only case he ever broke wide open, as far as we can remember, was filled up with bottles. If Iron Jaw ever caught anything, it was something quite contagious. He is very fond of me and Snooty Piper. He would cut our throats without any compunction. When he spots us on the scene of the latest washout, he swears quite disgracefully.

"Well, what're you two wiseheimers doin' here?" the flatfoot bellows and paintings on the wall tremble violently. "You needn't think you'll find out anythin' from me. This is one case—"

"I would not bother to try," Snooty interrupts loftily. "I think the corpse would be more helpful than you, Iron Jaw. Scoop, let's look around."

It appears that the two citizens who lived in the house were never short of sugar as the furnishings are quite ornate to say the least. The home belonged to two bachelors by the name of Legg. One is in the room, but he is not very talkative as he is defunct. The other, we gather, is upstairs in his bed, having weathered the very potent poison that was planted in the evening viands.

"Maybe it is not murder," Iron Jaw says. "Look at the grub they was eatin'. I bet it was acute indigestion they had. We are just wastin' our time."

"A cute indigestion?" Snooty scoffs. "Ha, ha! Did you ever see a ducky appendix, Iron Jaw? I saw the cunningest giblets in a medical—"

"I will not stand for your guff," Iron Jaw trumpets. "I will have you both tossed out on your—"

"Do not say where, Iron Jaw! There is a lady reporter present," I says. "Tsk, tsk! Ain't you ashamed?"

Iron Jaw swells up like a puff adder he is that mad. But we ignore him. We go on with the crime and it is very interesting any way you look at it. The medical examiner says it is poison as the eyes of the citizen, who is ready for an obit, are contracted very noticeably like popcorn in a popper. He cannot name the poison offhand, but he is quite positive that it was something stronger than slippery elm.

"Did the other citizen take it, too?" Snooty asks and the long-faced gink with the dead satchel nods his dome.

"Boys, he can take it!" Snooty says then. "I gather that he had a much stronger constitution than the boys drew up in '76."

"I think it was in '75," I says to Snooty.

"What is this?" Iron Jaw yelps and jumps up and down very excitedly on a sofa until he goes right through it to the very rich rug. "Is this a history class or a murder? I'll clear the joint in just a min—"

"Oh, shut up!" Snooty says. "How is the citizen upstairs?"

"He has had quite a bad time and given up everything but his bankroll," a volunteer spokesman says. "His name is Lucifer Legg—the deceased was christened Egbert. As you may observe, they were not exactly on the dole. They must be well supplied with rocks."

"Well, I stick to my story," the corpse analyzer chirps, "It is murder from poison unknown, and I will demand an autopsy on Egbert as soon as we can get him moved out from under foot. The wagon will be here in a few moments. Good evening, gentlemen."

IT is just then that an old doll who we find out is the housekeeper calls from the stairs and says that Lucifer is now able to sit up and talk.

"He thinks he is very sure who killed Egbert," the dame says, "And who tried to do him in, too. Come on up quietly, the doctor says."

"Hurry before he relapses," Snooty says. The crackpot steps on Iron Jaw's foot just where a fresh bunion has sprouted and the detective remains sitting downstairs holding a tootsie as big as a Gladstone bag in his paws. We go up to look at Egbert's surviving relation. Lucifer's face is the color of a raw Scotch scone and he is a funny looking gink with red bushy hair and eyebrows that a rabbit could get lost in.

"All right, Mr. Legg," the D. A. says. "Who did it? Who do you think—"

"We got an anonymous letter threatening our lives two days ago," Lucifer tosses out. He straightens the ice bag that is balanced on his clammy scalp. "It is right here on the table. It was written in big letters with a brush and that is why I know it was Charlie who did it. We fired him a couple of weeks ago. He is a Chinaman and he was very much put out about it. He swore something about his ancestors and said they would knock us off. Charlie did it. Charlie Floo!"

"I don't blame him," Snooty says. "It is a very hot iron they have in the laundry at Charlestown."

"Oh yeah?" says Iron Jaw limping into the room. "Well, I will get him. If I have to chase him to Africa and back."

"It is China where Charlie Floo came from," Snooty says says to the flatfoot. "It would be a little roundabout to go to China by way of Africa—unless you smell a darky in the woodpile. Ha, ha! How can you be so ignorant, Iron Jaw?"

"What was it that was poisoned?" I asks, glaring at Snooty Piper in disgust. He does not know how to act even in a murder.

"I—don't—know," moaned Lucifer. "Oh-h-h-h, my stomach!"

"Well, that is about all," Iron Jaw says and rubs his big mitts together. "I will have Charlie Floo in the klink by midnight. And you two halfwits," he says, looking at us, "keep out of police business and stick to that joint where they print a paper or—"

Snooty Piper is very close to the D. A. who happened to be in the neighborhood and came in to look at a very heinous crime from a ringside seat. He has his hands in his pockets and there are several letters sticking out from the inside pocket of his coat. I don't know why Snooty Piper tripped and fell against the D. A. as there was nothing to fall over but there is no use trying to figure that guy out. He is more of a puzzle every time you see him.

Iron Jaw is very clumsy, too, and would jostle citizens in the front rows of the Red Sox ball park if he walked from the pitcher's box to center field. He bumps into a table and knocks something over. It turns out to be a little bottle and Iron Jaw picks it up and puts the stopper back. The stuff spilled on the table where he had planted his derby and so there is a nice stain soaked into the hatband but he does not know it.

He just wipes up the stuff from the table and then the big dope mops his face. In a few minutes his eyes start getting very bug-like and he stumbles across the room with his paws out in front of him like a sleep walker.

"It's my eyes," he bays. "I'm goin' blind! Everythin' is gettin' fainter—oh-h-h-h-h!"

Snooty makes a dive for the table and looks at the little bottle. It says on it *Belladonna*. Snooty laughs out loud and spins around to Iron Jaw. "I will buy you the tin cup if the Police Force will furnish your pencils, Iron Jaw," the crackpot stutters when he can get a breath from laughing.

"Snooty Piper," I says severely, "it is not very funny. There is a limit to—"

"Don't be silly," Snooty tosses out and points to the bottle. While I am looking at it, he goes over to Iron Jaw and helps him across the room. "I will see you to the door," he says. "I would not even let an airedale grope through the dark. Here's the door, Iron Jaw. Open it an'—"

The housekeeper yowls something, but it is too late. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy walks through the door and then there is

quite a terrible crashing and banging like a coal truck sliding down the sides of a very steep rock quarry.

"That—was—the door—leadin' down the back stairs," Lucifer croaks from his sickbed. "Twenty steps—oh-h-h-h my!"

"Why didn't you say so?" Snooty says indignantly but when he turns his pan toward me, I see he is still laughing and holding onto his sides. "I am a stranger here," he goes on. "You couldn't expect me—to—"

Six or seven big policemen go down and see what Iron Jaw looks like. They bring the flatfoot back in a very few moments and the rim of his derby is around his neck like a Sir Walter Raleigh collar. Iron Jaw is quite bruised from heels to haircomb, but his voice has not been damaged in the least. He could double for the lions in the zoo and anybody would throw him raw meat.

I have never seen Iron Jaw quite so unreasonable. His lamps are still shining like two diamonds lying on black velvet, and the citizen whom he makes a pass at is not Snooty Piper at all. It is the D. A. And Iron Jaw knocks him right across Lucifer Legg's bed.

"Police!" yelps the corpse's brother. "H-help! Get him off me—somebody—oh-h-h! Here I am dyin'—"

"You wait, Snooty Piper!" Iron Jaw howls. "Blind or not, I will hunt you down and twist you in half like a bread stick, you—" It is not language that the censors would pass.

THE D. A. gets up and says Iron Jaw is fired—to turn in his badge, the halfwit. Iron Jaw gropes out of the house and the last we see of the big, two-legged bloodhound he is feeling his way down the street and has got all the traffic in the ditches. Snooty yells after him, and the flatfoot stops. A truck jams on its brakes and crabs into a big elm tree.

"All Chinamen look alike, you big cluck!" Snooty hollers. "You better arrest all of them in Boston an' weed 'em all out, ha ha!"

The D. A. says for all of us to get out as it is the most disgraceful murder investigation he ever heard of. But snooty Piper is quite set in his ways and he says he is from the *Evening Star* and must look around further so that the public will know all.

"Go ahead!" the D. A. yelps. "I hope you swallow some cobra venom, too!" he barks at Snooty. "That's my hat you're sitting on. Get up!"

When we are alone with Lucifer Legg, Snooty picks up the bottle of belladonna and holds it in front of the sick citizen's bugle. "What is that for, huh? Is it poison?"

"Of course not," the old dame of a housekeeper says. "It is for eyes when they are tested for glasses. Don't you know anything?"

"I know," Snooty retorts, "that rabbits don't lay pink, boiled eggs. Maybe you know more than you let on, huh? Did you poison Egbert?"

"That's enough, you fresh reporters," the gink in the bed butts in. "Mrs. Shannigan has been with me for ten years."

"I wondered what made her look like that, ha ha," Snooty says. "Well, we must know all. We cannot overlook a single clue in the apprehension of this dishonest criminal, Scoop. Who is that? Whose picture is that on the dresser, Luc—er—Mr. Legg, huh?"

Lucifer turns his dome on the pillow and takes a swift gander at the photo of the doll. From where I sit it is not a bad looking dish, but I cannot see why any doll would give Lucifer a picture. He is not very attractive as he looks quite similar to Doctor Jekyll after he drank the demon juice.

"That is my—er—fiancée—our fiancée—" Lucifer starts to explain. "She—"

"Make up your mind—whose fiancy is she?" Snooty yelps. "What is her name?"

"Flora Whittlesticks of the Back Bay Whittlesticks," Lucifer says. "But it is none of you darn business, see?"

"Tut tut," Snooty chides him. "You might coax a stroke on. I am a very thorough criminal reporter and I am out to teach rough characters that crime does not pay. You will answer all questions, please."

"Oh, come on, you halfwit," I says. "It is very plain that the discharged Oriental

rubbed out Egbert, and made a very good attempt at this tax payer. The letter will convict Charlie Floo as Chinamen always write with a brush. What else would you want?"

"Maybe you're right, Scoop," Snooty says, "but I get over zealous at times in my work. Let's go out and weigh the evidence over a stein of ale."

It is when we are in a taproom not far away and in a dark corner at that, that Snooty Piper pulls something out of his pocket. I would not have been more scared if it had been a very testy black widow spider. It is the anonymous letter that Egbert and Lucifer Legg had received from the rough character who poisoned their victuals.

"You crook!" I snaps. "You stole that with all the policemen around—right out of the D. A.'s pocket! You will get hung for that! You come with me right this minute. We will get a cab and take it down to headqu—"

"I wish you would not get so excited in public," Snooty sniffs. "Shut up, Scoop, as I only borrowed it. I'll say the D. A. must have dropped it and I picked it up thinkin' it was mine from my heart flutter and thought no more about—"

"Please, Snooty, let me pass," I says. "I don't feel very safe with you. I will not be arrested if I know it."

Snooty is no more perturbed than an actor in front of a camera. He reads the letter that Iron Jaw is very sure Charlie Floo painted. "Most honorable sirs," he chirps, reading out loud, "honorable ancestors of Charlie Floo very angry with white devils. Honorable ancestors kill unless Charlie Floo get back job. Charlie Floo good boy. You take him back pretty soon right away."

"It ain't signed," Snooty says after he comes to the end.

"Criminals are not very thoughtful of the policemen, are they?" I sneer at him. "Snooty Piper, I am asking you like a brother—take that letter back, you crackpot. Oh-h-h, it's jail this time sure. Twenty years of it!"

"It is very amazing the more you look at it," he says as if I hadn't spoken. "There is a red spot on one corner of the envelope but it is not blood. Now on the paper the letter was written, Scoop, you will see a little nick on one side. The paper was torn off a tablet like you buy in a very cheap stationer's."

"Go on, Hawkshaw," I says.

"I can see you have no powers of deduction anywhere about you, Scoop," Snooty says. "You are not much help to me."

"Then I will just run along, Snooty," I says with alacrity. "I would much rather be walkin' around with a well-scalded citizen carrying a bottle of nitro than with you and that letter. Good evening, Mr. Piper."

It is the next morning that Snooty Piper meets me and I try to hide from him in a subway kiosk. It is just as a lot of trains are unloading commuters from the outlying suburbs, and the rush sends me flying right out into Scollay Square where Snooty can see me.

"Scoop," he says, "we will not bother to report to Dogface this morning as we have no time to spare. I have been burning the midnight oil. It is a caution the things I have thought of."

"The cuckoo experts at Danvers would wrap you up in a strait jacket quickly, I imagine," I says to him, "if they heard those thoughts. Well, who killed Egbert Legg? I suppose you have read the papers and noticed that they have arrested Charlie Floo? Iron Jaw has got his picture in the paper handcuffed to the saffron citizen. At first I thought Charlie was alone standing near the Federal Building, but a structure like that does not wear a derby, does it? Well I am waiting, Snooty. Tell me the worst."

"We will make the rounds of the drugstores in Concord this morning," Snooty says, "and find out who has been buying *physostigmine*."

"Phy—ah—er—come again, Snooty?" I say. "I bet you two bucks you can't pronounce it the same way twice. If that is what killed Egbert Legg, I would rather forget all about it. It is too hard to spell. Who told you?"

"In the newspaper," Snooty goes on, "the autopsy proved it was a rub-out. We must work fast."

I do not say anymore as Snooty is something you should just let go like a pair of very agitated runaway horses. We do not miss a drugstore in three suburban towns that morning and Mr. Guppy has got a taxi bill that looks like the rent for a fight club for three nights. But whatever the poison is that Snooty asks about, it has not been sold in the vicinity for the last five years.

"It is a trifle discouraging," Snooty says. "But—ha, we will go to all the oculists in Concord next."

"You mean *you* will," I snap. "I am cab sick now and I wash my hands of the whole affair. I will see you this evening at the Greek's. Don't try and coax me as I might get violent. I am quite adamant about it."

SNOOTY sounds even nuttier when I meet him around five in the afternoon. "I am getting very suspicious about a certain citizen," he says. "I have called on all the oculists in Concord and what do you think?"

"I imagine you saw some very interesting spectacles," I says. "Ha, ha, that is a horse on you, Snooty! Well, what did you find out? I am quite agog. Look at my vest pant."

"Lucifer had his eyes examined the other day," Snooty says. "And after he had gone, what does the doc miss but a bottle of belladonna."

"Then he killed Egbert," I says. "It is plain now. He swiped the belladonna and put arsenic in it. Snooty, you are so smart, I—"

"I could fracture your skull very easily sometimes," he comes back. "It was not arsenic. It was phys—phrost—well, it wasn't arsenic, Scoop Binney! But it is very strange that a citizen with plenty of rocks would not buy his own belladonna, Scoop."

"The oculist might be wrong, too," I says. "He could have mislaid his—"

Snooty nods, and I says: "Well, you are just where you started. Just let the policemen work it out and we will go and see if we still work for Mr. Guppy. I am a little short of cash and—"

"Oh, I almost forgot," Snooty says. "I met Abigail this afternoon in Lexington. She was attending a D. A. R. meeting and she gave me two tickets to a lecture that Professor Dilby is giving on plants this evening."

Abigail Hepplethwaite is an interesting female. She is a little old doll who is quite a card and she lives in a wikiup in Back Bay that would make the home of the Hapsburgs look like a tool shed. Abigail could write off eight million dollars worth of bad debts and she would still have enough rocks left to put gold inlays in the Andes mountains.

"That will be very exciting," I says gloomily. "Did she laugh when she gave the tickets to you?"

"You are not very grateful," Snooty admonishes me. "She says to me, 'Piper, you take Binney with you, too, as he might as well sleep there as in a grog shop.' She is very droll, isn't she?"

"I have got a date," I says. "I will not waste my time listening to Dilby talk through his bugle on the floras and faunas. It is all very silly. Don't Abigail ever get any burlesque passes?"

Snooty just looks at me. Then he says: "Well, I intend to improve my intellect and I am taking advantage of Abigail's kind offer. I have got a hunch that maybe I will learn something that will help combat the criminal element."

WE are just parting when who crosses our paths and totally eclipses a city block but Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy. Iron Jaw is quite arrogant as usual.

"Hello, boys," he booms, "how'd ya like my pitcher in the papers?"

"So that was what it was," Snooty chortles. "I told you it was not a picture of Boulder Dam with an iron kettle on top of it, Scoop. You owe me a buck! Ha, ha! Did the Chinaman talk, Iron Jaw?"

"He's guilty all right," the flatfoot bawls, nettled at Snooty's remark. "I'm goin' downtown now to make him sign a confession. Laugh that off!"

"Ha—ha—ha!" Snooty brays obligingly and heads for the subway.

"You better hand over that evidence you stole," Iron Jaw bellows after him.

"The D. A. swears it was you—he—"

I have never seen Snooty Piper more bug-eyed than he is when I meet him the next A. M. on the Common. He is breathing very fast like an old dame who just climbed the Washington Monument.

"Well," I says, "keep it down. Go git some bicarbonate of—"

"Scoop," the crackpot says, "it is getting very plain to me. You should have heard Professor Dilby's lecture. Quick, we will pay a call on Flora Whittlesticks in Back Bay. Hurry, call me a cab!"

"How about one for me?" I tosses out. "I can ride one."

It is close to half an hour later that we are ushered into the presence of a society doll who will never see forty again even in a beauty parlor. But it is very plain to us that there was a time when she could have made a vanity chorus look like a line of Piute squaws. Snooty only takes off his hat when I almost knock it off. He is not very polite.

"Were you engaged to Egbert Legg?" Snooty yips like he is asking a window cleaner for a match.

"Why—er—this is very presumptuous, isn't it?" the doll says haughtily. "Who are you?"

"G-man," Snooty tosses out—and he will get fifty years yet. "Somebody bumped Egbert—an'—as a citizen we call upon you to help track down the tough character who—"

"Well," Flora says, "I wasn't exactly engaged to Egbert. I was making up my mind whether to marry him or Lucifer. I was a bit in favor of Egbert as he is—was—more stable, I thought. Lucifer lacked the ardor, the dash, the *savoir faire* of—"

"I would not be surprised," I says. "Snooty, what are you wasting time with this dame for? Come on."

But Snooty is already running for the door. His next stop is in an office building on Boylston Street. On the directory in the lobby he runs his finger down some names until he comes to *Legg & Company, Stocks and Bonds.*

"We will look in on Lucifer's office," he says. "The trail is getting very torrid. I bet as torrid as the dizzy blonde you had out last night wastin' your time, Scoop."

"She was dizzy," I says, "but she was not a blonde. Shut up about my private life and tell me what Dilby said."

"In due time," the crackpot yelps, and hops into an elevator. "Let me off at the twenty-ninth floor—be sure, won't you?" he says to the man at the switch.

"If I don't, we'll climb the flagpole," the guy comes back and lets out a loud guffaw.

"You are very fresh, aren't you?" Snooty says and if it had not been crowded in the lift, there would have been fisticuffs, I am sure. Snooty would manage to have words with a little blind flower girl. He says he is a detective and flashes a badge. No one could ask me where he got it then, but I found out that night that Iron Jaw was looking for his all afternoon. We get into the office and look at Lucifer's desk. There is a bottle of mercurochrome on Lucifer's desk. Snooty pockets it and then lifts a pad of paper from the desk also.

"Look," he says, "now who killed Egbert, huh?"

"Why, there is nothing on the pad, you dope," I bark at him, disgusted. "Did you read handwriting on the wall?"

"Boy, you are dumb!" he chirps. "Look!" He takes out the letter that is supposed to have been written by Charlie Floo. He spreads it out flat and lays it on the pad. It fits, and the nick on the edge of the paper is in the same spot as one on the side of the pad where it looks like the blade of a paper knife had scraped it. I stagger to the window as I feel quite gaga, and I drag a gallon of fresh ozone into my lungs before I look at Snooty again. I am still seeing colored dots, but I says to him I am ready.

"Ha," the fathead laughs, "he wrote the anonymous letter himself, Lucifer did. We will go and arrest the citizen."

"But you can't prove he poisoned Egbert," I hollers at him. "You've got to do that, chump. Snooty Piper—"

On the next corner from the office building I catch up with him. He is just calling Joy Street.

"Send Iron Jaw and three detectives

to the Legg house in Concord in half an hour, lieutenant," he hollers. "They will find the citizen who rubbed out Egbert. Who—me? Guess! Ha, ha!"

It is very late in the afternoon when we walk upstairs to where Lucifer Legg is propped up in bed. He greets us with: "Well, did Charlie Floo confess?"

SNOOTY PIPER shakes his dome and looks out of the window. He goes back and sits beside Lucifer. "Me and Scoop didn't think to bring you any fruit to eat," he says. "But you will get a very much bigger surprise in a few moments, Leggy old boy."

"What is the idea coming in here and disturbing me?" Lucifer yelps then. "You git out! I'm a sick man. Nurse!"

Just then we hear the law coming in downstairs. The floor quakes and rocks so we know Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is leading the way upstairs. The big flatfoot lumbers in and glares at us very fiercely.

"What are you two punks doin' here?" he roars. "How did you know about a telephone call, huh? Wire tappin', huh? Well, that means ten years—"

"Arrest Lucifer Legg," Snooty says. "Put the bracelets on him. He bumped off his brother, Egbert, so he could marry the society doll!"

"Wha-a-a-a-at?"

Lucifer squawks and reaches under his pillow. He drags out a cannon that should have had wheels on it, and pulls the trigger. Snooty dives under a table and the bullet goes through Iron Jaw's derby. Four policemen smother Lucifer and all that shows of the dishonest person is a pair of bare shanks that are kicking like steamboat paddles. But it is not very long before Lucifer is hors de combat.

"H-how did you do it?" a citizen with a badge asks Snooty Piper.

"Look at this letter he wrote and blamed on the Chink," Snooty tosses out fast. "He wrote it on this pad we found in his office. He got that red stuff that you put on cuts on the envelope. Look at his index finger. It has got adhesive tape on it. When he mailed the letter to his house, he got a stain on the envelope from that stuff.

"But that is not the half of it. Just wait! I found out what killed Egbert and made Lucifer sick. It was a poison called physos—phlis—well, it comes from the calabar bean and only last night I attended a very interesting lecture on the flora and fauna of Java by Professor Dilby who used to teach the Harvards.

"Now Dilby says the poison of the calabar bean used to be given to dishonest citizens in Java to see if they were guilty or not. The ones who kicked off were guilty. Dilby says that some of the natives got very wise and found out that if you took an overdose of it, you could throw it up and you would only get sick. But if you took a little only, like Egbert —you were ready right away for the spade and the boneyard.

"So Lucifer poisoned himself, too, but took a lot of it and he survived, as you may see for yourself. Professor Dilby mentioned that belladonna was an antidote for the poison and so—huh, Iron Jaw remembers that there was some in the room—as what did he do but get it into his eyes. So I put two an' two together and—it is very interesting to hear lectures, Iron Jaw. For a mind that can be improved, I mean. Ha, ha!"

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy swears and picks up a glass of water and downs it hurriedly as he is as weak as a doll who finds out her toothbrush is quite pink.

"Quick—get him to the hospital," Snooty hollers. "It is the phy—sph—phystog—whatever it is, oh-h-h-h-h! Even Iron Jaw will die from that. Quick!"

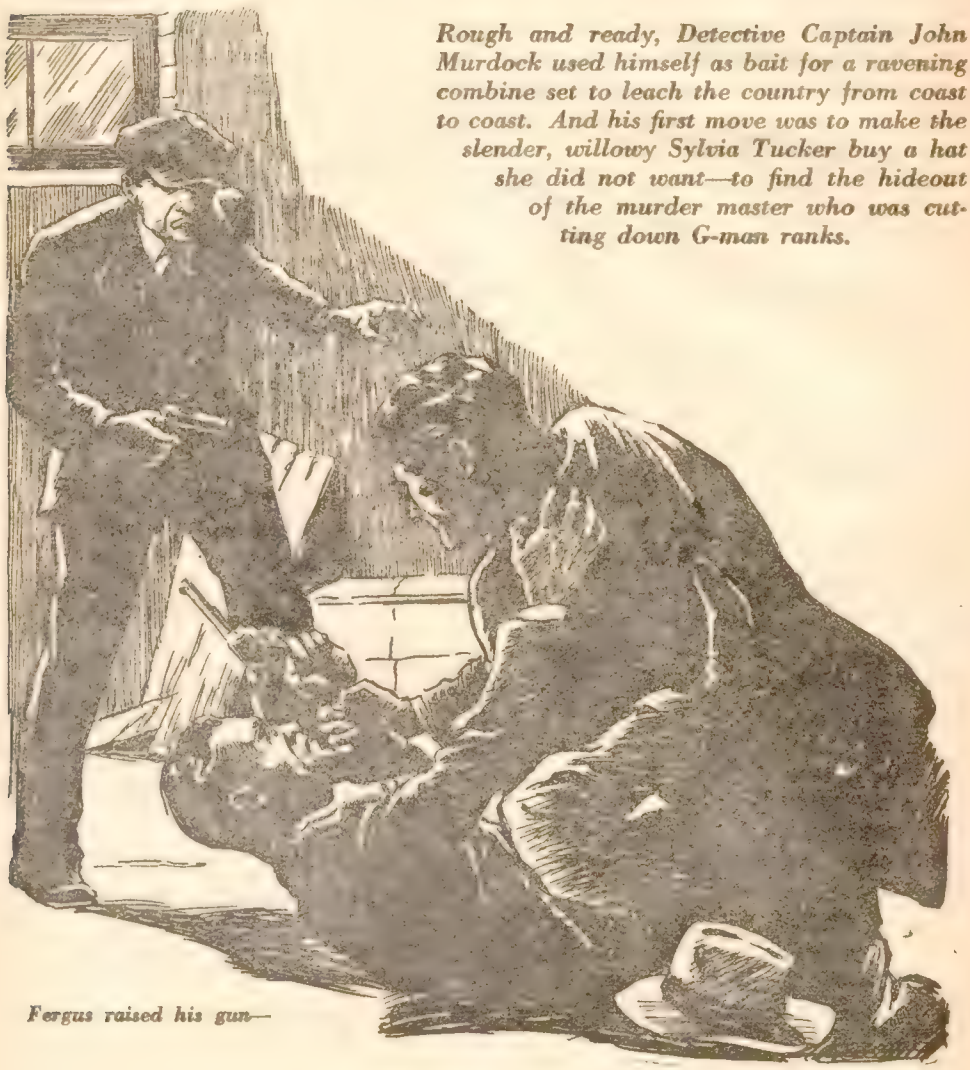
Snooty Piper does not hang around long after they rush Iron Jaw to the nearest hospital.

"Well, I should think you would go to the hospital and see if he survives," I says to him very testily. "It would be the only decent thing to do. You are a cold-blooded fathead. Haven't you got any—"

"Don't be silly," Snooty says. "It was just plain water, I assure you. I think it is a very good idea to leave town for awhile, though, after we write our sensational crime story for Mr. Guppy. Did you ever have a stomach pump used on you, Scoop? Come on. We must hurry."

# League of the Damned

*Rough and ready, Detective Captain John Murdock used himself as bait for a ravening combine set to leach the country from coast to coast. And his first move was to make the slender, willowy Sylvia Tucker buy a hat she did not want—to find the hideout of the murder master who was cutting down G-man ranks.*



*Fergus raised his gun—*

*"Capt. Murdock" Novelet*

*By*

***Carl McK. Saunders***

**Author of "Dragnet Dynamite," "The Doomed Jury," etc.**

## CHAPTER I

### Midnight Conference

JOHN MURDOCK was suddenly conscious that some one was shaking and whispering his name. He opened his eyes. The room was dark and the vague, indistinct figure of a man was leaning over him. The detective heard him say, low-voiced: "Murdock! Murdock! Wake up!"

Murdock groaned and mumbled incoherently as a man will who objects to being awakened. He started to turn sideways, then rearing up, grabbed for the intruder. He fastened one arm around the man's neck and jerked him down on the bed, grasped for his wrists, twisted around and got on top of him. It was ridiculously easy, for the man didn't fight back at all. He said, into the pillow against which his face was pressed: "All right, all right. Have your fun, but don't break that arm. I might want to use it again."

Murdock took the gun from the shoulder holster under the man's arm. He patted his pockets for more weapons, but did not find any. Then he got off the man and said: "Turn over, but lie right where you are."

The man rolled over. He said: "No lights, Murdock. It's Sam Preston."

MURDOCK stared at the man on the bed. The gray light from the windows etched his features in cloudy shadows, but they were still distinct enough for the detective to recognize. Murdock gasped, then started to laugh. He put down the gun and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Easy," Preston warned. "If I had wanted to advertize the fact that I was calling on you, I would have knocked."

Murdock sobered. "What's up, Sam? What's the matter?"

"Plenty," Preston answered. He sat up, flexed his arm and made a wry face. "You damn near broke it," he complained.

"It was your own fault," Murdock grunted. "I don't like midnight visitors who come unannounced. How long have you been in town?"

"A week."

"A week, and you didn't look me up?"

"I couldn't."

"As bad as that, huh?"

"Worse," Preston nodded. "Have you ever heard of the League of Tomorrow?"

"The what?"

"The League of Tomorrow."

Murdock shook his head.

"It's an organization of criminals," Preston volunteered, "headed by a man who calls himself the General but whose real name is James Laydon. The Department of Justice has been after him for a long time. Twice he's slipped out of our hands, and after each time he's grown more powerful and more canny. This League of Tomorrow that he's organized is composed of criminals carefully selected by him for the jobs he has in mind. They do the dirty work. He stays in the background and collects the loot. He's managed to avoid publicity. He doesn't eat it up like most criminals. He's more clever than most."

"Sounds like he might be an interesting chap," Murdock commented.

"He is. What's more, he's here in Central City and he's called in the leaders in his organization for some kind of a meeting. This is the first time he's ever called a meeting like this and it's got us federal agents worried. When I tell you that Laydon is the man who was back of the Washington bombings, the man terrorized Evanston with a series of killings in connection with kidnaping exploits, the man who engineered the looting of the Denver mint, and who planned the series of bank robberies in Minnesota that so upset the small towns in that state a couple of months ago—you can see why we're a little disturbed over what he may be planning next."

John Murdock nodded. He said: "Anything that we can do, of course—"

"I'm coming to that," Preston said. "Laydon knows that we know about his meeting here. Every move I make is watched and reported to him and the same is true of our other men. I had a notion that if we could work through your office it might be wise."

"How?"

"I don't know, exactly. We'll work that out."

"Where is his meeting to be?"

"I don't know that, either. But I do know that some of his men are to report to him here Friday. One of our men discovered that at the cost of his life."

"Two more days."

"Yes, that's all."

"Where is Laydon's hideout?"

"We don't know that, but we've got to find it, John. We've got to break it up. We've got to get Laydon. Those are orders straight from Washington. We're to do it at any cost. There may have been more spectacular public enemies but there was never one who was more dangerous. He has plenty of money, can buy all the cheap criminal help he needs. He could start a reign of terror like this country has never seen and that's not exaggerated a bit."

John Murdock nodded.

"And don't get the idea that this is the usual case, John," Preston continued. "If you go to your usual stool pigeons, he'll hear about it and you'll disappear some night, real sudden. You've got to be more clever than that. I'm coming to you because I know what you can do. I've worked with you before. Because every move we make is watched, you get a line on him, on the meeting, then call Glendale 8421, and our men will do the rest."

"That's a big order for two days."

"I know it, but we won't be idle, even though we are watched."

Murdock nodded, got up. "I'll do everything I can, Sam."

Sam Preston picked up his gun, holstered it and moved toward the door.

"Keep it quiet, John," he advised.

Murdock grunted. "I will. And next time you butt in on me, Sam, be more careful."

"I'll bring a club," Preston promised. He opened the door and stepped out into the hall. Murdock closed it after him.

## CHAPTER II

### The Warning

JOHN MURDOCK pulled on his pants and shirt, slipped on a tie, stepped into his shoes and reached for his coat. Then he moved over to the window to close it. He got to the window just as Preston emerged from the apartment house, and stepped out into the street, to cross over to the other side. There wasn't a car in sight at that time, but even as the detective was turning away from the window, he saw a car without lights shoot out of the alley and bear down on Preston.

The federal agent saw it, too, and started to run, but he didn't have a chance. The car hit him, tossed his body into the air and kept on going. His sharp cry of pain came up to Murdock's window. He thought that he could hear the thud of his body as it fell to the street.

Whirling away from the window, he dashed for the door. Without waiting for the elevator, went down the steps, two at a time. He reached the street and hurried across to where Preston's body lay, just as three other men came running up. He did not pay much attention to them, but knelt at Preston's side. The federal agent was dead.

He said: "It was murder," and looked up, blinked, and then got slowly to his feet. The three other men who had come running up were scowling at him, guns in their hands. He raised his own hands shoulder high.

He didn't ask any questions. Questions were not necessary. The car that had hit Preston had gone around the block and was slowing down as it neared them. These three men facing him had come out of the alley. They were a part of the murder crew and it was their plan to dispose of the body of the man they had killed.

One of the men facing him said: "Just keep 'em up, mister, an' keep your mouth shut."

Another asked: "What'll we do with him?"

"Take him to see the General," said the first man.

The car stopped and the driver, a sharp-featured man leaned out and said: "Did I get him or did I get him?" He sounded well-pleased with himself.

Murdock looked down at Preston, he looked at the driver of the car and clenched his fists. He wanted to seize that man by the throat, tear him to pieces. But that wasn't the way to play the game. If these men would take him to the man they called the General, he couldn't ask for a better break.

One of the men facing him said: "This

guy saw it. We're takin' him to the General."

The driver nodded. "Make it snappy."

Two of the men picked up Preston's body and shoved it into the back of the car while the third kept his gun on the detective. Then that man ordered Murdock to climb into the front seat.

Murdock got in beside the driver. He was congratulating himself on the way things were shaping up, when one of the men who had climbed into the back seat of the car, slammed him over the head with his gun and knocked him unconscious.

WHEN John Murdock opened his eyes he discovered that he was tied in a chair in a small, dimly lighted office. From where he was sitting he could see a man seated at a desk. The man was very thin. He had deep-set eyes and a high forehead that glistened in the light. The skin on his face was tight and dry and without color.

Murdock's head throbbed painfully, and when he shifted his body, the chair in which he was tied made a squeaking noise. The man at the desk looked up. For a long moment he stared at the detective without speaking. Then he said: "Comfortable, Mr. Murdock?" His voice was low and soft.

Murdock shook his head. "No—General."

The man smiled. "I'm afraid that you've been hearing tales about me. It was unfortunate about Mr. Preston, wasn't it. He was such a nice fellow."

Murdock tested his bonds, but he was bound firmly. He twisted around to study the man at the desk, but made no answer to him.

The man at the desk said: "The men who brought you in didn't know who you were. They wanted to—eliminate you. They thought that perhaps you misunderstood the manner of Mr. Preston's death."

"I didn't misunderstand it," Murdock said, grimly. "He was murdered."

"An ugly way to put it."

"Murder is always ugly, Laydon."

"So you know my name, too?"

"Yes, I know your name."

Laydon shrugged. "Too bad. I'm afraid that makes what I had in mind impossible. I had wanted to release you; after certain promises, that is."

"Such as?"

"Such as the promise that you would forget all about what Mr. Preston told you."

Murdock shook his head. "You don't know me very well, Laydon. I've only got one life, but I think too much of it to save it through any deal with a murderer."

"You are very foolish."

"Perhaps—but it's *my* life."

"I'm afraid that it won't be very long." The man at the desk raised his voice and called: "Arno!"

The door opened and Murdock saw a tall, wide-shouldered man enter.

Laydon said: "The river, Arno."

Arno called in two more men. They unbound Murdock from the chair, but did not release him from the bonds that bound his arms and hands. One of them blindfolded him and then they marched his outside, down a flight of stairs and into a car. A man sat on either side of him in the back seat.

A couple of times after the car started, John Murdock tried to get them to talk, but they would not say a word.

THE drive to the river was a short one and Murdock knew they had reached one of the bridges by the change in the noise the tires made. He felt the car slow down and stop. Just what time it was he did not know, but he was sure that it was not yet light or the men with him would not have chosen a bridge for what they had planned. They forced him out of the car and one of the men said:

"Lead him over to the railing. Leave the car engine running. We'll fill him full of lead, shove him over an' get away."

Murdock tugged at his bonds, but they held him tightly. As the men led him toward the railing, he knew that he had only one chance, and a mighty slim one at that. Undoubtedly, the spot at which he stood was directly over the water of the river. If he could throw himself over

the railing before they shot at him, and land in the water without losing consciousness, he might manage to kick his way to shore. As slight as that chance was, his mind clung to it. He recalled the newsboy who had dived off one of the bridges on a bet. That boy's eyes had been open, he was a good diver—but still he had spent six weeks in the hospital after his adventure.

They came to the railing, and facing it, Murdock slumped forward over it, as though ill. One of the men said: "He's passed out, Arno."

Arno's voice answered: "What of it, back away. I'm goin' to let him have it."

Murdock did not wait to hear more. One of his feet found the first bar of the railing and he pushed himself upwards, threw his body forward. For a moment he thought that he was going to lose his balance and fall back to the bridge, but in another moment he knew that he had made it—that he was falling through the air. He heard the sound of shots and curses from the bridge but not a bullet touched him.

Then, as he tumbled through space, the awful feeling that perhaps the place from which he had jumped was not over the water, almost paralyzed his mind. He tensed his body for the shock of his fall, and when he hit the water it was with such force that it knocked all the wind out of his lungs and set up a great buzzing in his head . . . .

He did not completely lose consciousness, but his mind seemed vaguely separated from his body and he couldn't keep interested in what was happening. He knew that he sank down to a great depth, that he gulped down mouthfuls of water, that he came at last to the surface, only to sink again. After that, the confusion in his mind grew more complete.

He thought that he sank many times and he had the vague impression of crawling on his knees on the bottom of the river, but later he knew that it was on a sand bar that he had crawled. For it was there that a fisherman found him and cut off his bonds.

The fisherman was so astonished that he stammered and trembled.

Murdock said: "Can you get me to shore?"

The fisherman did. He talked to Murdock about a hospital, and insisted on taking him to one; but the detective, slumped in his seat, shook his head and said: "Police headquarters."

## CHAPTER III

### Boxed Death

JOHN MURDOCK had to be helped from the car into his office. His whole body was trembling and he felt very foolish and disgusted with himself. The sergeant on the desk called in a doctor and the doctor wanted to put the detective to bed. Murdock shook his head and the doctor shrugged.

"You go on like this, you'll kill yourself," he said.

Murdock answered: "I lost my life half an hour ago. This is just an extension. Dope me up to stop this damn trembling. I'll be all right."

The doctor gave him a hypo and some more advice, then departed, shaking his head sadly.

After the sedative the doctor had administered had taken effect, John Murdock reached for the telephone and called the number Preston had given him. When the connection was made, he said: "This is John Murdock speaking. A couple of hours ago Sam Preston called on me. When he was leaving, a car hit him—killed him. The men responsible removed his body. What they did with it I don't know."

The man on the other end of the wire said: "Let me get Joe Bush."

Murdock waited until he heard a crisp voice say: "This is Bush. The man you talked to told me about Sam. Are you sure he was killed."

"Yes."

"Then I must see you."

Murdock said: "I'll get a cab. In half an hour I'll pick you up between Fourteenth and Fifteenth Streets, in the alley between Webster and Cutting."

Bush said: "Okay."

Murdock hung up. He went across the street to an all-night restaurant, absorbed a cup of coffee, then went out and got a cab. It was beginning to get light.

He picked up Bush at the appointed place. Bush was younger than Preston. He had clean-cut features, was well tanned. He looked like a successful young business man. While Murdock told him what had happened he puffed on a cigaret, finished it and lit another from the butt. The cab carrying them drove aimlessly around the streets.

When Murdock had finished, Bush said: "We've got to get Laydon, Mr. Murdock, if it takes every man we've got. Success breeds confidence. He's been successful and I don't know what he may be planning, but it's something big. The men he's collected aren't small-time crooks. They're the biggest men in the game. If we don't smash this League it'll smash us."

"How many men have you got?"

"Fifteen. I've turned them loose. Laydon's men know them and Preston had an idea that we could lie low and let you take over until we found Laydon's hide out. But if he knows you're in the picture now, we might as well come out in the open."

"How many men in his organization?"

"We don't know, but we do know of over twenty-five who have been called here to Central City. It's somewhere between twenty-five and fifty, one of the biggest criminal organizations on record, from the standpoint of desperate men."

"Who are the men in it?"

Bush gave Murdock a typewritten list of names. "Here they are, some of them. You'll find records on some in your files. That'll give you something to go on."

Murdock took the list, looked it over, nodded. "But I'm going to try another angle," he said. "I'm going to try and locate the meeting place. He'd have to have quite a place to meet with twenty-five or fifty men."

For a while he and Bush discussed the situation, then he let Bush out and stopped for breakfast. He got back to headquarters at seven, still feeling a little shaky and tired.

When he entered his office he stood for a moment frowning at his desk. His inkwell was in a different place. The cleaning woman, he knew, had been there earlier in the night than his last visit.

Moving up to the desk he examined it carefully. In one of the drawers he found a small square box that he didn't recognize, and holding it to his ear, he could hear a soft ticking. He rushed with the box to the laboratory and put it under the floroscope. Inside was a clock-bomb. It was set to go off at seven thirty. He opened the package, stopped the clock and had one of the men go over it for fingerprints. There was not one.

AT a quarter to eight his telephone rang, and when he answered it, he recognized Laydon's voice.

"My little present didn't work, did it?" he said.

Murdock said: "No. The clock stopped."

"Very unfortunate," came Laydon's soft voice over the wire. I had more luck with Mr. Bush."

Murdock's grip on the receiver tightened. "Bush! What's happened to him?"

"Poor Mr. Bush," Laydon said, "was walking across the Tenth Street viaduct a few moments ago. He leaned over the railing to watch the flier roll into town, lost his balance and fell. It was too bad."

"You damn murderer," Murdock snarled.

Laydon laughed. He said: "You see, it was just luck that saved you, Mr. Murdock, saved you twice. The third time your luck might not hold. Of course, if you should forget what Preston and Bush told you, there might not be a third time."

"Could I count on that?" Murdock asked.

"Of course."

"But you know that I can't forget, don't you, Laydon."

A sigh came to Murdock's ears over the wire. "I was afraid of that," he heard Laydon say. Then the line clicked dead.

John Murdock hung up the receiver. He looked at the bomb on his desk, frowning. How that had come to his desk he had not been able to discover, but undoubtedly the man who headed the League of Tomorrow had learned that he had not died in the river, had seen him meet Joe Bush. Now Bush was dead and he had just barely escaped.

Why was it that first Preston and then Bush had been killed. They had been after Laydon for a long time, yet he had not ordered their deaths until they had talked to him. For some reason or other, it was his entrance into the picture that had precipitated their deaths. And unless he stepped out, he was scheduled to follow them.

There could be only one reason for it, so far as he could see: Laydon didn't want the local police on his trail and the only reason must be that he felt that the local police from their knowledge of the city, might be able to find the meeting place easier than the federal agents who were not so familiar with Central City.

John Murdock got to his feet and paced back and forth across his office. He had just two days to discover that meeting place—if he lived that long. That place where he had met Laydon was less than five minutes by car from Marshall Bridge. Which meant that it was probably in the center of town. But, as he recalled that room, it was too small to accommodate many men. It could not be there that they were meeting. Of course, it might be in another room in the same building. But what building? Except that it was an old building, or seemed old from what Murdock had seen of the interior of that one office, he had nothing else to go on. And there were plenty of old buildings in town.

Pacing up and down, he thought of the things that he might do to find the meeting place. And even if Laydon's men got him he knew that, once he started things, his own men would carry on.

His lips tightened and he stood up. It was beginning to get light in the east. He said, under his breath: "I've got just two days—if I live that long. The meeting is Friday."

## CHAPTER IV

### Number-Up Fusilade

THAT morning a special order went out to all patrolmen, asking that they make an immediate list of all vacant property on their beats, the lists to include everything from houses to abandoned factories. The order was signed by the police commissioner. He said that he thought the idea a good one when Murdock talked to him about it.

Ater that was arranged, John Murdock called Bert Andrews, Jimmy Spence and Sam Gluba into his office. In terse, crisp sentences he told them what had happened during the night. He showed them the bomb on his desk.

"This man who calls himself the General," he said to them, "is about as dangerous as any man I have ever known. I made the mistake of thinking that he wouldn't know that I had seen Joe Bush. It almost cost me my life—and Bush is dead. He'll know by this time of the special orders that have gone out to the men on their beats. He'll know that, even if those orders do seem to come from the commissioner, I'm behind them."

"You think he'll try and get you?" Andrews asked.

Murdock nodded. "I know he will."

"Was it worth it, then? There's plenty of vacant property. What good will a list do?"

The detective shrugged. "Maybe it won't do any good, but we've only today an' tomorrow—an' we can't miss a bet. There are three other jobs, one for each of you, an' if you get tripped up on 'em, probably the same end as Preston an' Bush met. In other words, you've got to work damn fast an' careful."

The three men looked at one another. Sam Gluba's fat face wrinkled into a smile. "What's mine, chief?"

"Sam, I want you to get a list of all the building permits issued in the last month, especially those for alterations inside. We don't care about buildings that are going up. Check on all those jobs—just look 'em over. See how legitimate they look."

Gluba shook his head. "I don't see the point in that."

"You will. And you, Jimmy, I want you to check with every hotel and public building and place large enough for fifty men to meet. Find out what's goin' on tomorrow night, but for Pete's sake, don't just go around an' ask questions."

Spence nodded. "Okay, chief."

"Bert," Murdock said to Andrews. "You check the light connections to all houses, large houses, in the last month. If there are not too many—and there won't be many large houses—look the places over."

Andrews nodded, frowning.

"For the next couple of days," Murdock went on, "you will not make your reports to me here. You will report to me at the West Hotel. I will have a room there under the name Allen Fall. You had all better take rooms there. I'll try an' get it in on an expense account. I'm going to leave Townsend in charge here. All of you stay away.

"But get this idea very firmly intrenched in your minds. The man we're after is no fool and every step you take will be in danger. None of what we are doing may lead us to him or to his meetin' place. There are only two bets we have. In the first place, they need a hideout large enough to accommodate fifty men. The meetin' must either be held in secrecy or under the guise of something legitimate. Second, they were awfully anxious that the local police should stay out. Maybe that was because they were afraid of publicity, but I think it was really because they thought that we might find out where they were meetin'. Now beat it—and, good luck."

WHEN the three men were gone, John Murdock called in Townsend and asked him to take things over for a while. Then he saw that the match he had stuck into the works of the clock to stop it was firmly in place, rewrapped the bomb, tucked it under his arm and left. He got into his car, and headed west. Another car followed him, but he lost it soon after striking the highway just outside the city limits. Ten miles farther on, he took a side road.

For almost an hour he drove, crossing several highways and making a circle halfway around Central City, ending up at last on a treefringed road that bordered a large cemetery. He left his car there, got out, locked it, climbed the cemetery wall and found the keeper whom he knew. The keeper was glad to drive him into the city in an old truck, and to let him out in the alley behind the West Hotel. Inside, he got a room, and from it he called Glendale 8421.

To the man who answered, he said: "This is Murdock again. I guess you've heard about what happened to Joe Bush."

"Yes, we've heard," answered the man on the other end of the wire.

"Then don't try an' see me," Murdock said. "If I learn anything, I'll let you know."

He hung up the receiver before the man could make another reply . . . .

Late that night, John Murdock, with Jimmy Spence, Sam Gluba and Bert Andrews, went over the reports which had come in from the patrolmen. There were pages and pages of them, and in most instances nothing more was listed than an address with the word, house or store written after it. The reports had been sent via special delivery.

Pushing them aside, John Murdock got to his feet and paced back and forth across the room. After a while he stopped and shook his head.

"Not a thing," he said. "Where do we go from here."

None of the three men answered him. Previously they had related the results of their day's work, and in nothing that they had said was there anything that sounded promising.

Reaching for his hat, John Murdock turned toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Gluba asked.

"To headquarters," Murdock answered.

"Headquarters?"

"Sure. That's the only place to go."

"But—"

John Murdock said: "You fellows wait here." He went out and slammed the door.

REACHING headquarters, Murdock went directly to his office and asked Townsend to bring him the day's reports. One by one he went through them, then, suddenly, he gripped one of them tightly and read it a second time.

"What's this?" he asked Townsend.

Townsend read over the report. "I handled that myself," he said, finally. This chap Nickerson, who came in to make the complaint, is the secretary of the Plasterer's Union, Local Number 76. He says that they've been picketing a place on Grand avenue, where there's some kind of a remodeling job going on, and where they're employing scab labor. One of his sandwich men was beaten up. I went out there with him and the others were gone. I couldn't find any witnesses and he didn't have any. I told him to let us know if there was any trouble."

"What kind of a place is it on Grand avenue?"

"A place where they sell hats."

"Street level store?"

"No, it's upstairs."

"Who runs it?"

"A dame named Carter. Lola Carter."

"Who's the contractor?"

"Sperry."

"Get me his address an' get me the address of the Carter dame."

Murdock leaned forward, reaching for the telephone. He heard a tinkle of breaking glass, felt something nick the back of his neck, thud into the opposite wall. He threw himself forward, sprawling to the floor. Then he rolled toward the window. The shade was halfway down, and he could reach the cord and pull it the rest of the way. He did it, then stood to his feet.

He felt the back of his neck. The bullet which had come through the window, and which had buried itself in the wall, had barely scratched him. But if he hadn't reached for the telephone at just the time when he did, he would be lying there on the floor now, dead.

Townsend came back with Lola Carter's address. He said: "I can't find out where Sperry lives."

Murdock said: "Forget it."

He crossed over to the door, stopped when the telephone rang, and he guessed, even before he heard Laydon's voice, who was calling him.

Laydon said: "Sorry, Mr. Murdock, but I will not miss the next time. You have just one chance to live. Take a taxi from the city hall to the station—and take the next train west. I will have a man on that train. If you are still on it at noon tomorrow, you will be safe. If you leave it before then, he will wire me and I will see that you are taken care of."

Murdock laughed. "I don't like train rides. They make me sick. Besides, my luck is holdin' up. I'm immune, now."

He heard a click and he knew that the line was dead, and as he hung up he knew, too, that Laydon hadn't been offering him safety. If he had been frightened into accepting Laydon's offer, he would never have reached the station alive. His number was up. Laydon knew that he would never drop out of the picture until he was dead.

Murdock said to Townsend: "Get that window of mine fixed tomorrow an' dig that bullet out of the wall. I want it for a souvenir."

Then, without answering Townsend's excited questions, he went down the back stairs to the garage and had one of his men wheel him out in a squad car with an open siren. The car turned left, but as it neared the street intersection, a truck blocked its way and the driver jammed on the brakes.

Murdock jumped from the car before it stopped and headed for the closest building. He tripped, sprawled to the ground, but as he fell he drew his gun.

A SEDAN with drawn curtains slid past, and as it neared the spot where Murdock lay, the detective saw one of the curtains go up and a sub-machine gun poke out. Raising himself on his elbow, he shot the driver. Just as the

sub-machine gun started firing, the car swerved. It crashed into the police auto.

Men came pouring out of the station, firing at the car. The driver of the squad car unlimbered a gun and went into action. For a moment the night was made loud with a fusilade of shots. Then things quieted down and Murdock got to his feet.

He called to Townsend and said: "If there's anyone alive in that car, work 'em over an' see if you can make 'em talk. That goes for the driver of the truck, too."

Then he hurried away. That is what would have happened to him, if he had left by taxi; only it might have been more successful, then. This man Laydon moved quickly.

Even when he was back at the West Hotel, Murdock expected to hear from him, but the night passed without any trouble.

## CHAPTER V

### Murdock Buys A Hat

AT ten o'clock the next morning, John Murdock entered the Mayfair apartments and asked the blonde on the desk to ring Miss Sylvia Tucker.

She shook her head. "Miss Tucker usually doesn't get up until noon. She doesn't like to be bothered before then."

"You ring her," Murdock instructed. "I'll stand the blame."

"Yeah?"

He nodded, reached into his pocket—and the blonde smiled. Pulling out his hand he held it out to her, closed.

The blonde said: "Well, maybe—if you're sure . . . ."

Murdock opened his hand. It held his shield, and when the blonde saw it, her face flushed.

"Go ahead, sister," Murdock said.

She jammed in the telephone and pushed down a lever. After a moment she nodded to a phone on the desk. Murdock picked up the receiver and said into the mouthpiece: "It's me, Sylvia, old man law."

The voice that came to him sounded sleepy. "Do I dress for a ride?"

"Not today. I'm coming up."

"Give me half an hour."

"I'll give you five minutes," Murdock answered.

He hung up the receiver, grinned at the blonde and walked over to the elevator. "Miss Tucker's apartment," he said to the boy.

The door opened almost as soon as Murdock knocked, and when he stepped into the darkened room, he said: "Up with the shades, Sylvia. It's morning."

Sylvia Tucker's tall and slender body was wrapped in a pink, silken robe. Her hair was brown and curly. When she raised the shades and the light fell on her face, she seemed to be pale and tired. The lines around her mouth and her eyes showed clearly, and made her look old and hardened.

"What do you want?" she asked the detective, reaching for a cigaret and sinking down into a chair.

Murdock grinned. "Sylvia, you need a hat."

"What?"

"I said you need a hat."

"Women always need hats. Did you come clear up here to tell me that?"

"More than that. I came to give you five dollars to buy one."

She stared at him, shook her head. "You want more than the hat for five dollars."

"Yes," he nodded. "I do. How about it?"

She shrugged. "I always was a chump. Where do I buy the hat, and what do you want me to find out."

Murdock told her what he wanted.

JUST after noon, Sylvia reported to him in his room at the West Hotel.

"It's a nice little shop," she said, "but they don't have many customers. There were only two who came in while I was there. They have a good line of hats, most of them very reasonably priced. There were two clerks, besides the woman who runs the place. One is a young girl; the other, an older woman.

Lola Carter is in her early thirties. She opened the store a year ago, after her husband died, using his insurance money. And if she isn't straight, I'll eat every hat in her store."

"You like her, huh?"

Sylvia Tucker nodded. "She's had a tough time, but she doesn't whine about it."

"What changes are they making in the store?"

"The place is just one room. They're putting in a partition to close off a workroom. Then the whole place is going to be done over. They're going to try and do it all tonight."

"Tonight, huh?"

"Yes. There were only a couple men working there this morning, finishing the partition."

"How did she happen to make the improvements?"

"She said a friend advised it."

"What friend?"

"She just said a very close friend—a man, I think. That's what women mean when they say a very close friend."

John Murdock grunted, got up and walked over to the window, scowling.

"You say she's been there a year, huh?"

Sylvia Tucker nodded. "And she's straight, John. You can tell that after looking into her eyes. But thanks for the hat, just the same. Like it?"

Murdock looked over at her, nodded. "What did it cost?"

"You gave me five dollars, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, that was the price."

"For that little thing?"

Sylvia Tucker smiled. "That's my story—and I'm sticking to it." She waved to him and left.

Bert Andrews came in a few minutes later. "I located Sperry," he said.

Sperry was the contractor on the renovations at the hat shop. His name had not been found in the directory and Murdock had sent Andrews out to run him down.

"What about him?" he asked.

"Okay, it seems," Andrews replied. "He hasn't lived here long, came here from Chicago. He's about fifty, little, stooped. He doesn't have any use for the union; says that he will never employ anything but scab labor. He's pretty radical about that. But from all I could learn, he's a legitimate contractor. He gave me several jobs for references and I checked them. He thought I wanted some work done, so he talked freely."

"What about the job he's on now?"

"He says he'll finish it up tonight. He's putting in a crew at five o'clock, plans to work 'em all night."

"Where does he hire 'em?"

"Blumfield's Employment Agency on South Fourteenth."

Murdock frowned, shook his head. He said to Andrews: "On the face of things, we're off on the wrong foot. You say Sperry is okay, and Sylvia Tucker says the Carter dame is all right. Everything around the place seems to be on the up-and-up, except for the beating up of those pickets."

"I asked Sperry about that. He said that he didn't know anything about it, but that maybe some of his men did it. He didn't seem to care."

"Are they picketing the place again?"

"No one there when I was there."

"Huh. Go find Nickerson. He's the secretary of the union, who complained to Townsend about what happened to his men. Find out why he stopped."

Andrews nodded and went out.

AFTER lunch, Jimmy Spence came in with the plans of the building which housed the hat shop, and for a while Murdock studied them. The hat shop was on the second floor of a three-story corner building, on Grand Avenue, at the edge of the business district. The ground floor was occupied by a real-estate office. The third floor was cut up into small offices, most of them vacant.

There was no elevator. To reach the hat shop, one had to walk up a flight of stairs from the street. The only other entrance, or exit, was a fire escape on the side of the building. There was no fire escape on the alley side, and the build-

ing next to the one that housed the hat shop was several stories higher.

Sam Gluba came in just as Murdock finished studying the building plans. He said: "Nothing in the girl's apartment, chief, that means anything, so far as I can figure out."

Murdock nodded. "I could have guessed that. Nothing wrong any place and yet there's a meetin' of fifty men scheduled for tonight. We've checked every meetin' place in town, and there isn't a scheduled meetin' that looks wrong. But some place this League of Tomorrow is meetin'." He reached for the telephone.

## CHAPTER VI

### Murdock Takes A Job

WHEN Murdock reached the police commissioner by telephone, and told him what he wanted, the commissioner said: "Surely, Mr. Murdock, if you think it's important. Why don't you run over and see me about it?"

"Sorry," Murdock answered, "but I can't make it right now. However, if you'll just send out that order, I'll appreciate it. Have every man pay particular attention, tonight, to every vacant house and building in his territory. Have him call headquarters if he notices any sign of activity at all, no matter how legitimate it may seem."

"But just what do you have in mind?" the commissioner asked.

Murdock said, grimly: "I'm just playin' a hunch."

The commissioner's laugh boomed over the wire. "All right, Murdock. Good luck."

Murdock hung up. He said to Gluba: "Maybe that's not important, but we'll play every card we've got. Tonight's the night."

He got up, walked over to the window, and looked out. For a moment he stood there, then he turned to the telephone book, looked up Nickerson's address and said: "I'm goin' out for a while, Sam. You wait here."

While a cab carried him out to the address given for Nickerson, John Murdock felt vaguely uneasy. If his guess were right, and the Hat Shop was the place selected by Laydon for the meeting place of his League, then Laydon would have resented Nickerson's report to the police, and if he had not been able to buy off the labor leader, he might have resorted to violence. He had sent Bert Andrews out to see Nickerson. Of course, Bert knew how to take care of himself, but for some reason or other, Murdock could not shake off his feeling of uneasiness.

The cab pulled over to the curb and the driver said: "We're here, mister."

Murdock nodded, got out and paid his fare. He looked over at the modest, one-story, frame building in front of which the cab had stopped. It was painted white and green. Flowers grew in the yard. The place looked peaceful and quiet. Walking up the path to the front door, he told himself that he was being very foolish. He reached it and knocked.

The door opened suddenly, very wide, and a short, stocky man with a gun in his hand confronted the detective. The man said: "Come in an' get your hands up!"

Murdock entered the room as the gunman backed away from the door. He saw a man he guessed to be Nickerson, bound and lying on a couch across the room. Bert Andrews, bound and gagged, was in a chair near him. There were two other men in the room, and a woman. The woman was middle-aged. She was tied in a chair. The other two men were free and carried guns.

One of them said: "This is gettin' to be quite a party." He addressed Murdock "Who are you, an' what do you want?"

Standing just inside the door, John Murdock stared at the man who had addressed him, glanced at the man near him and then at the man who had admitted him. Hard-featured, in their early thirties, they were of a type he knew well. They would not use the guns they held, unless they had to; but if forced, they would use them effectively. They were not doped-up killers, but cool,

desperate men. He guessed that they had been sent out to Nickerson's to keep him from creating any more trouble around the hat shop, and when Andrews had shown up they had made him prisoner, just as they had taken him in.

Two thoughts flashed through his mind as he faced them. The first was that the hat shop was the place for which he was searching. The presence of these men here proved that. And the second was that with him a prisoner, too, the information would be of no value. In some way or other, then, at whatever cost, he had to escape.

He turned his glance toward Bert Andrews and his lips tightened. His hands were raised shoulder-high. Andrews must have read his intention, for he shook his head in warning.

Murdock said, nervously: "What's the idea? What—what's goin' on here?" He took a step backwards.

The man who had spoken to him said: "Get more rope, Joe." And one of the three men left the room.

AS the door closed behind him, Murdock glanced at Bert Andrews, who threw his body sideways, tipping his chair to the floor. Both of the armed men glanced toward him, and in that instant, Murdock acted. His hand had to move only a few inches to whip out the gun under his arm, and as it came out, he shot.

The man nearest him uttered a cry and staggered back, dropping his gun and clutching his shoulder. The other man whirled and threw a shot at Murdock. It was so close that it nicked his shoulder. Murdock fired again and that man went down, clutching at his throat.

The man who had left the room came running back and Murdock turned toward him. The man played wise. Seeing what had happened to his two companions, he raised his hands, his face pale.

"Cut 'im loose," Murdock commanded.

The man moved over to Andrews and unbound him. He untied Nickerson and the woman, Nickerson's wife. Then he moved over against the wall and stood with his hands upraised.

Andrews flexed his muscles and said: "Thanks, chief—but it was an awful risk." He took the ropes that had bound him and tied up the man who stood against the wall. Then he moved over and examined the two Murdock had shot.

Nickerson was telling Murdock what had happened. His wife was standing at his side, clutching his arm and looking more frightened than she had looked when she had been tied up. She chimed in to add to what Nickerson said.

Murdock shut them off, went to the phone. He called headquarters and got Townsend, gave him the address.

"Send out a private car," he said. "We have three customers, one for you, one for the hospital and one for the morgue. I want the arrest kept quiet."

He hung up and turned to the man who stood bound against the wall. "You want to talk some about the League?" he asked.

The man shook his head. "I want to see a lawyer."

Murdock laughed. He said to Andrews: "You go in with him. Maybe if you treat him right, he'll talk."

"He'll talk all right," Andrews promised.

"Then see that the Nickersons leave. Better take 'em in, too. I don't want 'em to talk. Let me know what you learn at the West Hotel."

"You goin' there now?" Andrews asked.

"After I get a job," Murdock said.

A BLOCK from Nickerson's home, while waiting for a street car, Murdock was lucky enough to get a cab, which he had drop him in the lower part of the city near Blumfield's employment agency. Sure now, that the Hat Shop was the meeting place for the League of Tomorrow, he reasoned that the men coming to Central City made contact with Laydon through that place, and would probably be sent to the hat shop that night in the guise of laborers. If that were right, it would explain why

Laydon did not want Nickerson fooling around picketing the place and drawing the attention of the police to it. Such a plan would also give Laydon a good and legitimate excuse to get all his men together.

Of course, if Blumfield were acting as the contact man for Laydon, the men who reported to him would have some password to identify them—and Murdock didn't know what that would be. But a visit to Blumfield should verify his suspicions.

There were a dozen men sitting around the dingy waiting room of Blumfield's agency when Murdock entered. On the blackboard at one end of the room several jobs were listed—mostly farm work for couples.

The detective read them over, then shrugged and moved across the room to Blumfield's office. He pushed open the door and entered.

Blumfield was little, dark and dirty. He looked up, scowling, as Murdock entered, and said: "Who let you in?"

"No one," Murdock answered. "I'm a plasterer. Gotta job for a plasterer?"

Blumfield's eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "Get out."

"I ain't union," Murdock told him.

"Get out."

Murdock said: "I thought maybe—"

He broke off as the phone on Blumfield's desk rang, and when Blumfield answered it, he listened to the man's monosyllabic answers. They didn't tell him anything, but when Blumfield hung up he said: "Wait—where you from?"

"Seattle," Murdock stated.

"An' you've come here—"

"For the meetin' of the League."

Blumfield smirked. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?" He scribbled an address on a piece of paper. "Go to this address at five o'clock. Take your lunch an' be dressed for work."

Murdock mumbled his thanks and got out. While he walked down the street he tried to act unconcerned, but his employment had been too damned pat. It had come just after Blumfield was ready to throw him out, and on the heels of a telephone call. That call could have come from only one source—Laydon.

As he considered that, the logic of the situation struck him forcibly. Laydon had doubtless kept a watch on Blumfield's place, had seen him enter and had known that he was on the right trail. To have killed him then, would have meant that Murdock's men would have carried on. Laydon was wiser in arranging for Murdock to attend the meeting. He guessed that Murdock would be rash enough to risk it, and with Murdock in his hands, he might be in a position to force Murdock to give out false signals, or he might even bargain with the man of the law.

When Murdock got back to the West Hotel, Gluba and Spence were waiting for him. A man named Brewster was there, too. He had succeeded Bush in charge of the government agents.

Murdock told them what had happened. Brewster wanted to surround the place and stage a raid, but Murdock shook his head.

"Let's play it Laydon's way. He's expectin' me. I don't want to disappoint him."

"But it's sure death to go there tonight."

Murdock shook his head. "He knows we know where the meetin' place is located. He knows that we'll surround the place. He wouldn't be there himself unless he had an ace up his sleeve that we don't know about. Maybe I can uncover that ace. I've got a job an' I intend to report for work, lunch pail, work clothes, an' all."

## CHAPTER VII

### League of Tomorrow

A FEW minutes before five o'clock, John Murdock, dressed in old clothing, and carrying a lunch pail under his arm, turned into the stairway that led up to the hat shop on Grand Avenue. He looked like a laborer and he had made what seemed to be a clumsy attempt to disguise himself. It was done deliberately, for he knew that he could not perfect a convincing disguise.

As he started up the stairs, his mind passed over the precautions that had been taken to protect him, but now that he was entering what he was sure was the meeting place of the band of criminals who called themselves the League of Tomorrow, he could not get much satisfaction out of those precautions.

Within five minutes the entire block would be surrounded by a cordon of police, and other men would go through the adjoining buildings and see that they were all vacant. The streets would be blocked off from all traffic, and men with powerful glasses would be watching the windows of the hat shop for any signal that he might make.

But in spite of all that, in spite of the help outside, he was very much on his own, now. From what he had seen of Laydon's work, he knew that the task ahead wasn't the simple one of closing in on the men who had gathered here.

Reaching the top of the stairs, John Murdock pushed open the door of the shop and entered. There were about a dozen men in the place, standing around in small groups, talking, and as he came in, one of them came up to him and said: "Your slip."

Murdock handed over the paper Blumfield had given him.

The man looked at it, nodded. Another man came in and he left Murdock and went over to him.

Murdock crossed the room to where some of the men were standing. He saw several faces that seemed familiar and he knew that he had seen them before on police circulars. He began to catch a feeling of excitement, of tension. The men looked uncomfortable in work clothes. Several were smoking cigars.

As he came up to the group, they turned to him and looked him over, their eyes hard, calculating.

One man said: "You're new, aren't you?"

Before Murdock could answer, a voice that he recognized said: "He's very new, gentlemen. He's just joined us, in fact."

Turning, John Murdock looked into the eyes of James Laydon. There was a faint smile on Laydon's lips.

The men around Murdock drew away. Several of them slipped their hands under their arms. There was a moment of deep silence in the room.

Murdock shrugged. "So I lose, but the effort was worth it."

"Was it?" Laydon asked.

Murdock looked around at the men, nodded.

Laydon said: "Sperry, you take charge here. All my men have arrived, and with this last group, I'll join the others. Mr. Murdock, here, will go with us. Within the next few minutes half a dozen more men will show up. They're regular workers. You'll see that they go ahead in the usual manner. Undoubtedly you will be visited by the police. They may be a little worked up. They may even arrest you, but you have nothing to fear. I will see that you are released."

Murdock frowned. The way Laydon was talking, it seemed as though he planned on leaving. But there was no escape for him. By this time the entire block was surrounded.

Laydon said: "All right. Open it up."

Two of the men in the rear of the store swung aside a counter, and bending over, pulled up a trap door. Recalling the plans of the building, Murdock knew that the door would lead to the back room in the grocery below. But what would that gain them?

Laydon said: "Your gun, Murdock."

Murdock handed over his gun.

"You may keep your lunch pail, though I'm sure you'll not need it. Now, if you will step to the back of the shop—"

Murdock moved that way and noted how cleverly the trap door had been arranged. His men would find it after they arrived, he knew. But it would take them some time.

Looking down the opening, he saw a ladder extending to the floor below, and after several men had gone down it, he followed. Laydon came after him, and then more of the men.

In the room below, several of the men, who had pulled their guns, stood watching him, grim and silent, while the others descended. When all were down, two

of the men moved aside a desk and opened still another trap door.

Laydon said: "You hadn't figured on this, had you, Mr. Murdock?"

The detective shook his head. The silence of the men, the grim way they looked at him, the confidence in Laydon's manner, all told him of the seriousness of the situation.

He said: "So you're takin' to the ground like rats?"

A man standing near him lashed out with his fist, staggered him. Two more surged forward.

Laydon snapped: "Wait!" His voice was charged with anger.

The men paused, but in the expressions on their faces, Murdock could read something of the fate that awaited him. Under Laydon's directions he was searched for weapons, then directed to go down the ladder into the room below. Still clutching his lunch pail he did as he was ordered.

FROM the cellar room Murdock was led through a cleverly hidden door to another cellar room, where a man opened a door to a dark, downward-sloping passageway. Men gripped his arms and walked down it with him. The passage turned and finally came to still another door that opened into a large, lighted room.

Estimating the distance that he had come, John Murdock decided that the room he had just entered was directly under the street, some twenty feet or more below the surface of the ground.

It was damp and close in the room. The walls were of earth, but there was a wooden flooring. There were men there, perhaps thirty of them, seated on opened folding chairs, and as he entered, they turned to stare at him. One of them gasped out his name.

Murdock nodded. He said: "Hello, Fergus. So you're Central City's contribution to the League."

Fergus jumped to his feet. Hatred showed in his face. His hand swept out a gun. Other men were rising, too.

From behind Murdock, Laydon said: "Not now, Fergus. The League has a way of dealing with men like Murdock. For a while he shall be our—guest." He laughed, thinly.

John Murdock set his lunch pail near the door through which he had entered. He moved toward the center of the room.

Laydon said: "Will you take that chair by the desk, Mr. Murdock."

The detective shrugged, moved over to the chair beside the desk and sat down. He looked over the men in the room. Many faces which he saw he recognized. Some of them were desperately wanted men. There were murderers there, escaped convicts, men with a price on their heads. Some of them looked bitter, hardened. In the eyes of some was a madness bordering on insanity. Welded into a machine by a man with plenty of money, with the clever mind of a super-criminal, audacious, bold, the men in this room could precipitate an era of lawlessness and terror that would be like nothing the country had ever faced.

As he looked at them, John Murdock saw that all their hatred of the law was centering on him. Every eye in the place was turned toward him and a low mutter was running over the group.

Then Laydon spoke. He said: "The first meeting of the League of Tomorrow is now in session. Will you all please be seated?"

Slowly the men sat down. Gradually they turned their eyes away from the detective to the man whom they knew as the General.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Rat Hole

DURING the next half hour John Murdock could hardly credit his ears with what they heard. Laydon started the meeting off, speaking slowly, softly, so that the members of the League had to lean forward to catch his words. But gradually, his voice grew stronger and took on a vibrant, electric quality that gripped his audience.

Mostly he boasted of what he had done and vaguely he hinted of what he planned. He recited the careers of other

criminals, pointed out their weaknesses: desire for fame, recklessness, lack of organization.

He said: "There is nothing in the world that can stop a group like this, if we all work together. I have the money necessary to finance our operations for a year. In that time we can milk the country dry. You can each be as rich as the richest man in the country, you can have what riches bring: power to command—to buy. It will all be yours!"

He went on in that vein for a long time, painting word-pictures of what their futures could be. He made the course that he proposed seem ridiculously easy, and the listening men believed him. He was a supreme egotist, and in every man before him, there was a like strain. As cleverly as the most practiced orator, he played on their emotions until Murdock felt that he could have made them believe anything.

Suddenly, the whole temper of his talk changed. Now he spoke of the dangers that threatened them, of the things that stood in their way which might make them fail. And the men looked at Murdock, scowling. Laydon noticed it and said:

"No, our greatest danger is from within our organization, from traitors, from men who would sell us out, who would betray us to police before we are strong enough to dictate our own turns. What should be the fate of traitors?"

A low murmur ran over the group of men. Several cried aloud: "Death—death."

Murdock saw a brief smile twist Laydon's lips. He knew that the General had his men where he wanted them.

"Bring in the prisoners," he ordered.

Two men left the room and returned almost immediately with two bound and blindfolded men.

"Stand them against the wall," Laydon ordered.

The men were stood against the wall.

"One of these men," said Laydon, "was formerly a member of this organization. He got drunk a week ago, talked about the League. He broke our pledge of secrecy. What is your verdict?"

"Death," came the answer.

Laydon took out his gun. He raised it, fired. One of the men standing against the wall slid sideways to the floor. There was a blue hole in the center of his forehead, from which trickled a thin stream of blood.

Murdock heard a sigh sweep over the room. He knew then why it was that he had not been killed sooner. He had been allowed to live until Laydon could use him as an example, then he, as typical of the law they hated, was to be executed—an object-lesson for the members of the League.

"The other man," said Laydon, "was also once one of our members. He betrayed his trust for money. What is your verdict?"

"Death," came the answer.

The gun in Laydon's hand spoke again. Murdock saw a round puncture appear in the forehead of the other man, saw his body slump to the floor.

He thought that now his own time had come, so he got to his feet and measured the distance which separated him from Laydon. If he could manage to reach Laydon, get his hands on his neck before the guns of the other men in the room cut him down, then . . . .

Laydon said: "Murdock, you too must stand on trial before the League of Tomorrow. You broke in here, planned to break up the meeting. You represent the law that would stand in our way." He turned to the men in the room. "What is your verdict?"

"Death," roared the men.

Laydon smiled mockingly at the detective. "Will you take your place at the wall, or would you like to be helped over there."

LOOKING into Laydon's eyes John Murdock knew that he would never be able to reach him before the gun in his hand spoke a third time. Already he could feel in his imagination the impact of the bullet that awaited him. He clenched his fists and said, dry voiced: "You are interested in traitors?"

Laydon frowned, surprised by the question.

"Then let me show you one," Murdock stated.

He turned on his heel and started toward the door which led to the passageway. With every step he took he expected to feel a bullet crashing through the back of his head. His whole body was bathed in perspiration. He counted his steps as he walked—one—two—three—four—five—six . . . . Men backed away from him, but they had their guns out and then he heard Laydon call out:

"Watch him, men."

At that his heart gave a great leap. It wouldn't be an execution now, for if he once got his hands on that lunch pail he had left at the door . . . .

He came to the place where he had left it, stared down at the floor, eyes wide. The lunch pail was gone.

"It—it's gone," he said.

"What's gone?" Laydon asked.

Murdock turned around, his shoulders slumped. He stared stupidly in front of him, saw a man holding a gun, saw the illumined dial of the watch on his wrist, saw that the hands were pointing to almost six-thirty.

He said: "My—my lunch pail's gone. I set it right here when you brought me into the room. There was a bomb inside, the one you sent to me. It was set to go off at—at six-thirty."

For a moment there was absolute silence, then Murdock saw men looking at their watches. He saw their faces blanch as they noticed the time. Then half across the room a man yelled aloud in terror and lifting a lunch pail high in his hands, threw it from him.

"I can hear it tick," he yelled. "I can hear it tick!"

Murdock knew that the man's statement wasn't true, for the bomb had not been set for six-thirty. It had been set to go off one minute after Murdock pulled the wire that extended from one corner of the box. But as the box curved through the air he realized that the man who had seen the lunch pail sitting beside the door, might have pulled that wire just a moment before. At any rate, that trip through the air and the bump of the fall, might loosen the match on the end of the wire and set the clock going. In that case . . . .

Men charged past him toward the passageway. He heard Laydon yelling at them, but the men were yelling louder, fighting to get out of the room. Murdock saw knives flashing in the air. One man started shooting his way out.

The detective watched Laydon. He saw the amazement and anger in his face turn to a look of fear, as he caught some of the terror that gripped his men. Then he saw Fergus rush up to Laydon, saw the two of them hurry to the opposite side of the room.

He laughed, grimly. Of course, every rat hole had another exit. Fergus, who had probably arranged this hideout, would know about it. Making his way to the other side of the room he watched them.

He saw Fergus clawing at the dirt, saw him find something, pull on it. Then he saw a section of the wall swing open and Laydon and Fergus run through. He hurried after them, and as he passed through the opening, he glanced back and saw that men were still jammed about the passageway through which they had come. They might get out there, he thought, but if they did, his men would have a warm r e c e p t i o n waiting for them.

The passage he had entered, wider than the other one, led upwards at a sharp angle. It was dark, twice he stumbled and fell, but ahead of him he could hear the other two men. He thought that he had just about overtaken them when there was a terrific detonation, and a rush of air along the passage threw him flat on his face with all the force of a blow.

Rather vaguely he realized that the bomb had exploded. The match had fallen out of the mechanism. He had just escaped that room in time, for those who had still been in there, when the bomb went off, would never leave it.

Getting to his knees and then to his feet, he staggered on. He came to an open door, stepped into a basement room, and saw across from him, Fergus and Laydon. They were tugging on a door.

He charged forward. His shoulder struck Fergus and bowled him out of the way. He reached Laydon. One of his hands clamped on the League chief's neck, and the other fastened on Laydon's wrist. He pulled him to the floor and they rolled over and over, Laydon trying to escape the punishing grip on his neck. He jabbed his elbows into Murdock's ribs, kicked, almost broke the detective's grip. But Murdock held on.

Fergus danced around them, aiming kicks at Murdock's head. He had forgotten the gun in his hand, might not have remembered it at all if Laydon had not gasped: "Your gun, fool—use it."

Fergus raised his gun, then, backing away a step. Murdock saw his hand tightening on the trigger. He strained desperately, rolled Laydon over in front of him just as Fergus fired. Laydon's body jerked convulsively, went rigid, relaxed. The gun slipped from his hand and Murdock grasped it. Fergus fired again but missed the detective by a foot. Murdock did not miss when he sent back an answering shot.

He got to his feet after that. His head was bloody from the kicks which Fergus had landed, and he was so exhausted that he could hardly stand. But he managed to make it to the door and beat on it with the clubbed gun. After a long while some one answered his knocking.

CAPTAIN JOHN MURDOCK sat at his desk looking over the statements that the federal agent had brought in. One was made by Sperry, the contractor. It told of how he had been hired by Fergus to construct the passageway and the trap door to the store above the grocery which Fergus had purchased, and of how he had induced Lola Carter, the proprietor of the hat shop, to agree to the alterations at a ridiculously low price, in order to arrange for a legitimate excuse for the gathering of the League members.

There was a statement by Blumfield, admitting his part in the plot. He had been Laydon's contact man. The members of the League had been instructed to report to him. Laydon, from an office across the street, had kept watch on the men who showed up. Murdock had not had the password, but Laydon had phoned Blumfield to give him a slip to report to the Hat Shop.

There were other corroborating statements made by other men, but there was not one from Laydon or from Fergus. They were both dead.

The federal agent said: "It was a nice clean-up, probably the biggest haul on record. Of course, we didn't get 'em all, but what we didn't get and you didn't account for, that bomb took care of. How did it happen to go off?"

"It exploded," Murdock said, "because one of the men in the League of Tomorrow was so much of a crook that he couldn't even pass up the chance to steal a man's lunch."

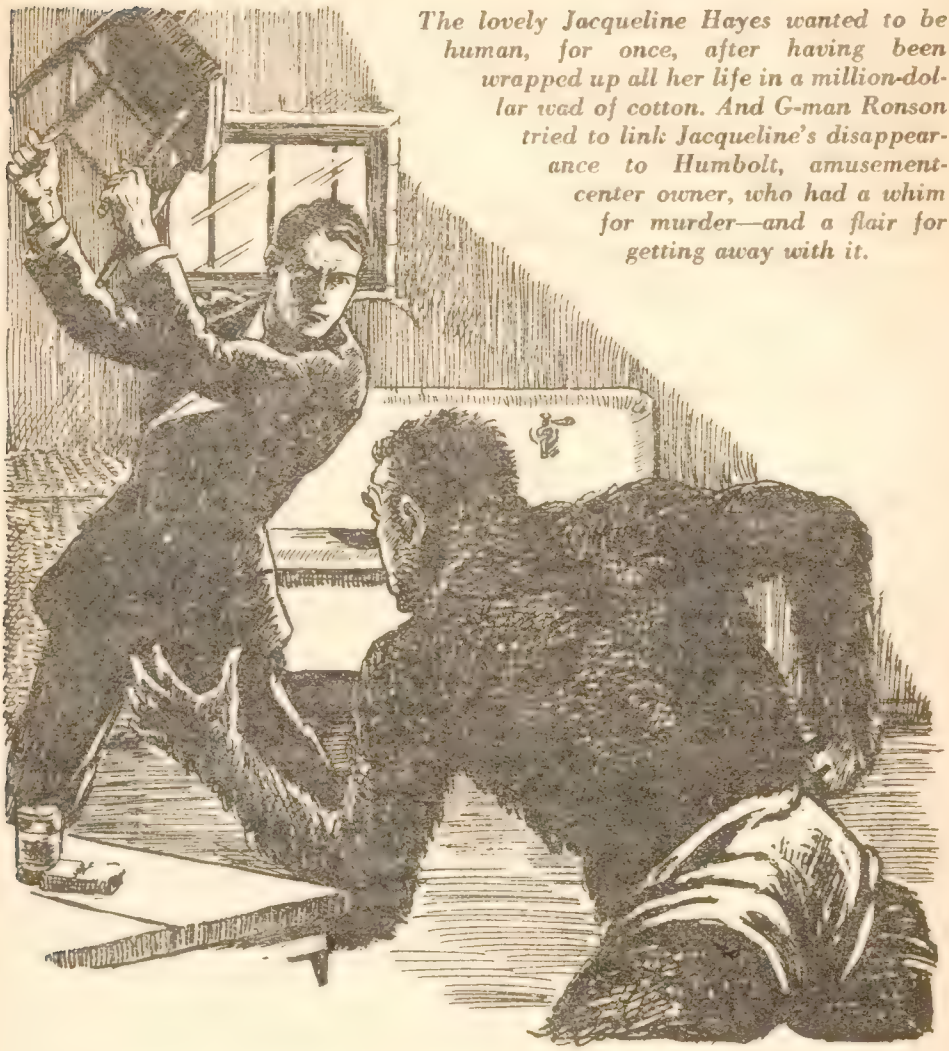
The federal agent looked bewildered. "What do you mean?"

John Murdock shook his head. "Forget it. How about a glass of beer across the street."

The federal agent agreed.

"We'll pick up Bert Andrews in the outer room," Murdock said. "He's a little sore at me for not takin' him along when I attended the meetin' of the League. The beer might mellow him up."

# Joy-Ride Snatch



*The lovely Jacqueline Hayes wanted to be human, for once, after having been wrapped up all her life in a million-dollar wad of cotton. And G-man Ronson tried to link Jacqueline's disappearance to Humbolt, amusement-center owner, who had a whim for murder—and a flair for getting away with it.*

## *By Ralph Powers*

Author of "Pinched by Proxy," etc.

LEW RONSON took a long breath and followed Police Chief Bragg down the shadowy hallway of the Ocean City morgue. The stillness was tomblike. The air was clammily dank. Ronson resented the contrast after the sunlight and noisy gaiety of the crowded beach outside. He felt suddenly like a man being piloted out of life's channel into a slough of death.

He waited while Bragg rolled back a heavy door, stepped with him into a room that was even colder.

Tier upon tier of big metal cabinets rose in front of him. Bragg grabbed the handle of one, yanked it. Mechanism,

smoothly oiled, shot a human body into Lew Ronson's sight.

"There's Kelly," said the police chief hoarsely. "Just as we found him lying in the gutter, night before last."

Lew Ronson stared with lynx-eyed interest. A man in the covert-cloth uniform of a private chauffeur lay on the cold morgue slab. It was hard to say whether he were young or old, for his face had been cut to ribbons and his fingers and hands had been slashed into crimson pulp. A single thrust had severed his carotid artery. Then the slayer, whoever he was, had gone on cutting, hacking, slicing as though insane.

"It looks like the work of a murdering nut, but it isn't!" said Bragg quickly. "The killer knew just what he was doing when he chopped that poor guy up. He wanted to throw a scare into the Hayes family and make them ready to come across after the girl was snatched. The paper we found in Kelly's pocket is proof of that."

Ronson turned away feeling a little sick. "Okay, let's go up to your office. I want to see that note and the rest of the stuff you've got."

Bragg nodded, closed the cabinet with a bang. "Sure, sure—but the stuff's been on exhibition to every G-man in this section, and to half a hundred dicks. There's nothing in it. You won't get anything out of it any more than the others. My best men have been working in relays for the past forty-eight hours. The clues found on Kelly are sour, and it looks like the girl can't be helped."

RONSON was silent as he stalked after Bragg, up to the street level, and into the police chief's office at the rear of the station house. He couldn't tell Bragg that working from sour clues was his especial meat. The head of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation at Washington had sent him to look things over because of his extraordinary talent for ferreting out facts. He was only twenty-four, slimly built, insignificant in appearance. But he was one of the inner circle of "brain-trusters" in the D.C.I.—a man who could use his head with the same dexterity that he could slam slugs from an automatic.

Bragg opened his office safe and took out a package. He unwrapped it, spread its contents on the shiny top of his desk. There was a wallet holding a chauffeur's license, a bunch of keys, a watch, a handkerchief, two ticket stubs and a strip of stamp-size snapshots taken in a photomat machine.

Some of the snapshots showed Kelly in his chauffeur's hat. Others showed the smiling face of a pretty, blonde-haired girl. She was the same girl whose piquant features had appeared recently on the front pages of every paper in the land—Jaqueline Hayes, the lovely heiress and debutante who had been snatched.

Bragg spoke like a man reciting a well-rehearsed part. "She and the chauffeur went the rounds of the amusement places after they left her aunt. The aunt was too fat to take the bumps in the scenic railways and chute-the-chutes, and the kid wanted a good time. She wanted to be human, for once, after being wrapped up all her life in a million-dollar wad of cotton. Somewhere on that joy trip she got snatched, and the chauffeur got bumped."

Ronson nodded impatiently. He knew the details of the kidnaping by heart. Jaqueline Hayes had vanished from sight, as though the earth had swallowed her in that vast, tinsel-bright, boisterous amusement center that was Ocean City.

Bragg drew a bit of paper out of Kelley's wallet and handed it to Ronson. It said, with brutal brevity:

> Look Kelly over! The same will happen to the girl if her family don't dig up the dough we want. There isn't a cop alive who can find her. When things quiet a little we'll get in touch with the family about the payoff price. Meanwhile they'd better go easy if they don't want the kid to get hers.

It was signed "The Snatcher," in well disguised writing, and Ronson shuddered as he recalled the horrible, mutilated face of the dead chauffeur. Jaqueline Hayes, with her golden, tender, childish beauty, faced the selfsame horror. She had vanished utterly in spite of the frantic hunt of a hundred detectives and cops. Every foot of Ocean City had been combed for

her. Every apartment, dwelling, shop and amusement place had been searched.

Bragg laid a finger on the ticket stubs.

"We thought those were our best bet," he said. "We knew if we could find where the kid had gone we might locate somebody who'd got a glimpse of the snatchers—somebody who's afraid to speak. But those stubs are the ordinary, stock-pattern, ten-cent kind with no name on them. A hundred joints down here use 'em. The torn ends could be matched up, of course, but my men combed every spot that hands out that type of ticket—and couldn't find 'em. We couldn't locate a soul who remembered seeing the girl or Kelly."

Bragg was silent a moment, then added sourly: "We even tried checking up on the paper those photomats use. There's seventy-two of 'em installed in Ocean City, so that all the saps who want to can shoot their own mugs. The manufacturers told us they all use the same grade of stuff for the snaps."

Ronson spoke quickly. "How about the known crooks around here—men with police records? Are there any of 'em?"

Bragg shrugged and snorted. "We're careful as hell about that in this town, on account of all the suckers. We take the pedigree of every guy in the place who ever tangled with the law. I could give you the dope on him, even down to what kind of toothpaste he likes. After the girl was grabbed we buzzed those birds first of all."

"Who are they?"

Bragg drew out a file card, checked off a dozen names, which Bronson wrote down.

"Kismet, the fortune teller, has been in jail twice for swindling," said Bragg. "He uses that type of ticket in his joint. So does the guy who calls himself Humbolt, the one who runs an amusement center and keeps all the freaks. He did time once for pulling the badger game. But we didn't locate the missing stubs at either of their places; and the girl wasn't there, either. The snatchers have taken her off somewhere, mister, or else bumped her and hidden her body. I'll lay my cash on the line that she's not alive in Ocean City."

Ronson nodded. "Probably so. But I'm going to start from scratch, here, where she dropped out of sight. I'd like to borrow those ticket stubs and those snaps of her that were the last pictures taken. See you later, and thanks for all the help."

OUT in the sunlight again, Ronson moved down the boardwalk slowly, carried along by the human stream.

Sun-tanned bathers romped and sprawled on the sand beside him: men in trunks, girls in two-piece ensembles that left smooth limbs and slender waists exposed. On the other side, away from the water, barkers kept up a steady clamor in the concession booths. Frozen custard oozed and dripped. Hot dogs sizzled. Mustard was spread over rolls and frankfurters, in pasty, yellow-green smears.

Ronson thought how the smiles on the happy faces of those about him would vanish if the smilers had seen what he had—the mutilated features of the chauffeur, Kelly, down in the gloomy dankness of the morgue.

He turned from the boardwalk to the street behind it lined with amusement places. He passed a newsstand, saw black headlines on a rack of papers:

NO TRACE OF KIDNAPED HEIRESS—G-MEN ON THE JOB IN DEBUTANTE SNATCH—HAYES GIRL FEARED SLAIN.

He stopped to stare at several more pictures of Jaqueline Hayes. Her smiling lips, her small, piquant face seemed to plead for his assistance.

Ronson got a five-dollar bill changed into nickels, dimes and quarters, and began systematically taking snaps of himself in photomat machines. His own face seemed to fascinate him. He collected a dozen strips before he reached the curtained, gaudy palace of the fortune teller, Kismet.

He remembered what Bragg had told him, noticed that the tickets, which Kismet's box office handed out, were the same type as the ones found on Kelly. He pocketed his stub, passed into Kismet's "Chamber of Destiny," and had his

palm read and his fortune told by cards and crystals.

Kismet, a fat, oily faker with bulbous features, predicted that Ronson would soon marry a rich movie actress as lovely as Cleopatra. Ronson shrugged, looked at an exhibition of lucky charms and wandered out.

He came to Humbolt's freak show and amusement center, got another bill changed and went the rounds of the electric penny movies, marked: "For Men Only." He saw fan dancers and boudoir cuties, tried his luck at skee-ball and bagatelle, and got another strip of pictures of himself at a photomat machine in Humbolt's entrance lobby.

Then he paid a dime and bought a ticket for Humbolt's famous freak show. He entered a big room, decorated in fantastic murals, and weirdly lighted.

Human gargoyles were all around him: the Limbless Wonder, who could roll cigarettes with his tongue and chin alone; the Living Skeleton, who looked like a corpse risen from the grave; the Fat Lady, and the Spider Man with his shrunken body, pin head and monstrous arms and legs.

Humbolt himself was there, ballyhooing a midget number. Tall and imposing in his black coat and Vandyke beard, he was haranguing a crowd of gaping tourists. "This way, ladies and gentlemen, to see the smallest specimens of adult humans in the universe!"

Ronson studied Humbolt closely. The man had a saturnine face, small, glittering eyes that forever wandered. He looked like a shrewd customer, one who would know all the tricks for fleecing suckers.

The place made a fitting background for him—a land of weird nightmares. Grotesque, monstrously outlandish human beings were all around Ronson.

He waited for Humbolt to finish his harangue, stared at the Ape Man and the Reptile Woman. The former had a bullet head and a simian body. The latter had greenish hair, dank as seaweed, and scales over her flesh instead of skin.

Ronson lighted a cigarette. The Ape Man snarled and blinked at the flare of the match. The Reptile Woman stared at him with her dull, dead eyes, the pupils large and unwinking as a lizard's. Ronson shuddered, turned away. This was a hell of a place, he told himself, for a G-man.

When Humbolt had finished his harangue, Ronson buttonholed him, and said: "Like to speak to you a minute.

HUMBOLT glowered. He seemed to know what Ronson wanted, even before he spoke. Detectives had been combing this and other amusement centers for the past two days. Ronson said casually: "I'm trying to get a line on the kidnaped Hayes girl."

"I know," said Humbolt. "There have been many others. The police have been making pests of themselves." Malice glittered in his eyes. "Because I once made a slip, and got into trouble with the authorities, I am treated as a suspect."

"I'm only going the rounds," said Ronson. "My coming here is nothing personal."

"That's what the others said when they turned my place inside out."

"Miss Hayes and her chauffeur went on a sight-seeing trip before she was grabbed," said Ronson pleasantly. "Your show's quite famous. I thought she might have come here—and you might have seen her."

Humbolt grinned nastily, showing broken teeth. "I am not like the clever G-men and detectives. I cannot remember all those who ever entered my place of business."

Ronson stabbed a finger at him. "Your job is picking suckers—and always has been. If a girl dressed like Jaqueline Hayes, and with her face, had come in here, it isn't likely you'd have overlooked her."

Humbolt smiled grudgingly. "That's right," he said.

"You didn't see her then?"

"No, most certainly, or I would have reported to the police."

"Okay." Ronson moved off without even asking Humbolt if he could search the building. He knew that Bragg's men must

have done that job thoroughly. He continued his rounds of all the amusement places in Ocean City. In none of them did he find a trace of the missing girl.

LATE that afternoon, Ronson stopped in at an optical-goods store, where he paid fifty dollars for a high-class magic-lantern device, which could project reflected images of photographs on a screen.

He tacked up a sheet in the hotel room he had hired, and, when darkness came, he threw enlargements of the photomat snaps of Jaqueline Hayes on the wall. He studied her blonde beauty tensely for twenty minutes. For hours then, like a man obsessed with egocentric, he stared at dozens of projections of himself.

By one o'clock that night, there was a pile of cigarette stubs in the ash tray on his bureau, and Ronson was pacing restlessly. His eyes were red-rimmed from too much staring. His face was flushed with excitement.

He reached suddenly under his coat, drew out his automatic and examined it, making sure the clip was filled, the safety catch was off. It was a special model, short-barreled Colt, flat and light and wicked.

Ronson left his hotel room, went to the street and saw that Ocean City had changed, since he'd looked at it six hours before. Subways, autos and street cars had done their work: the crowds had melted away, the swarming kids had vanished, and the tired, happy, sun-scorched people had all gone home.

Here and there a few weary concessionaires hung on. A beer joint was dishing out sour slop to its dopey clientele. Couples were drifting like sluggish marionettes across the drab windows of a single taxi dancehall. But the scenic railways and steeple chases were dark and silent. Not a barker's voice was lifted down the whole length of the boardwalk.

When Ronson reached Humbolt's Amusement Center, the big building, with its gaudy posters outside, looked like a place of forgotten horrors. The cavernous front was as black as a canyon, the windows dark.

Ronson did not go directly to it. Empty as those windows seemed, he knew there might be sharp eyes watching.

He kept among the shadows, walked down a boarded alley that led to the beach at the left of Humbolt's. He turned out of the alley, went through the gate of a handball court and stealthily approached Humbolt's amusement center from the rear. He moved like a midnight specter. There were living things in front of him, for the sleeping quarters of some of the freaks were on the grounds. They might sound an alarm, if he made the slightest noise.

Ronson took a jimmy from his pocket. In his fights with crime he had often practiced its use. He selected a basement window, pried cautiously at its sash for many minutes. Something gave, finally. He pushed the window inward, slid his body through.

He stood still, listening. Then, feeling sure he had roused no one, he flicked on his flash. He was in a storage room filled with old show cases, gilded chairs and cluttered paraphernalia. He inched forward silently toward the end of the big room, avoiding any collision that might make a sound.

The door there was unlocked, and Ronson stepped through it into a musty hall. He shivered slightly. The dankness, the gloom, reminded him again of the morgue corridor, and of Kelly's unsightly corpse.

His hand tightened over the butt of his automatic inside his coat. If the secret of Kelly's death and the girl's disappearance were here, then he himself was facing possible doom. The man who had slain the Hayes chauffeur again would kill quickly, to cover up.

Ronson softly climbed a flight of stairs. He jimmied a small bolt on the door at the top, found himself in a passageway that seemed to run to the freaks' exhibition hall.

He heard a noise, then. Something, or some one, was moving sluggishly in the gloom behind him. Ronson flattened himself against a wall, listening. The sound did not seem to come any nearer. It kept up steadily though, a restless scraping

whisper that continued, minute after minute.

He turned away from the room where the freaks were kept in the daytime, and moved wraithlike toward the source of that strange sound.

It issued from a doorway down the long corridor, apparently from one of the living chambers. Ronson started to put his ear closer, when another sound, off to his left, made him step back and crouch.

Footsteps were approaching, strangely, haltingly. Ronson, seeing a sudden flicker of light, hid beyond a bend in the corridor, got a glimpse of a giant shadow creeping along the wall. It was the Spider Man from the freak show, carrying an electric torch. The silhouette of his weird-shaped figure made Ronson grow tense.

The Spider Man reached the door from behind which the restless whispering sound came, and stopped. He took a set of keys from his coat, thrust one into the lock and slipped inside. Ronson could still see his shadow against a square patch of light on the opposite wall.

He came out again, from behind the corridor's bend, and, risking detection, slid toward the open door. The sound of movement inside was quieter now. The Spider Man was talking softly, as though in some jargon of his own.

Ronson came closer, hardly breathing. He must see in that door, see what the Spider Man was doing so late at night. But when he leaned forward, the other caught sight of his shadow and turned, screaming. It was a thin, furious cry that ripped from his wizened throat. The man flung himself at Ronson with amazing speed.

Ronson stepped back, reached for his gun, but hesiated to fire. He had no motive yet to kill.

His delay gave the other a chance to leap straight at him, unexpectedly. The long, hairy arms of the man who seemed hardly human, met around Ronson's body. Ronson lifted his hand from his gun, tried to strike savagely. The Spider Man had the grip of a strangler; he pinioned Ronson's arms at his elbows, kept him from getting the leverage necessary for a blow. Ronson hammered against the skinny body, without visible effect. The other's long legs curled about him, pulling him down.

RONSON fell purposely, letting his weight do what his fists could not. He felt the other's grip loosen as his body struck. The Spider Man twisted to get out from under Ronson's torso. This gave Ronson his chance to rise. Then the Spider Man screamed thinly again, and it seemed to Ronson that the whole building behind him grew alive with sound.

He heard a door slam. He whirled as the bounding shape of the other freak, who looked like an ape, leaped down upon him. The second human monster had come from a room close by.

Ronson swung his fist, lashed out and caught the Ape Man on the jaw. The hideous-looking freak fell back with a whimper, but, as Ronson turned, the Spider Man reached up again for a deathly grip. His fingers were higher now. He twined them around Ronson's throat.

Ronson suddenly felt like a man in a nightmare. These unhuman beings appeared to have double lives. He had knocked one out. The other had resurrected itself and was trying to kill him.

The weight of the Spider Man behind pulled Ronson back. He fell again, then fought to break away. The hands on his throat gripped tighter. Ronson's breath grew labored. Lights whirled before his eyes. He got to his feet and fought back madly, knowing he had little time to lose. The noise would bring others. He'd be killed, or knocked out, soon.

He flung forward, dropped his head and stopped short, his legs set stiffly. He felt the Spider Man's body swing above him. The man lost his grip, went hurtling over Ronson's shoulders to the floor. Ronson staggered back into the doorway, where the man had first gone, and slammed the door shut after him. He stood struggling to keep his balance, and gain his breath, after the fight he had been through.

A sound in the room beside him made him whirl. A dim light burned by a couch, from which a figure had risen. A black silhouette was coming toward Ronson,

moving with the sluggishness of some crawling thing.

Ronson got out his flashlight, swung its beam. The rays fell on the hideous, scaly face and body of the Reptile Woman. It was her bedchamber into which he had fled. She was coming toward him, slowly, relentlessly as a snake, eyes dull and fixed. He held the flashlight focused on her face, saw that the pupils of her eyes were staring, staring pools.

There was a sudden hammering on the outside door. Ronson held it, bracing it firmly with his shoulder. He couldn't move. He waited tensely, while this living horror with the scaly body came closer, second by second.

She was almost up to him now. Ronson reached out and caught her. Holding his right arm and shoulder against the door, hand still clutching the flashlight, he dug with his left at the woman's scaly arm.

She did not move. She hardly seemed conscious of his presence. Her face, with its strange coating, remained turned toward him. Her eyes had almost the dullness of death.

But Ronson wasn't looking at her face. He was staring at her arm, where his fingers clutched. He was feeling the scaly coating come away in flakes. He was digging, deliberately tearing it off in strips. Beneath it, down under that mat of loathsome, composite flesh, was the glint of normal skin. He took off more of the scaly stuff, exposing a slim, white shoulder.

Ronson worked frantically then. He reached up, dug at her face, while she stared at him with glassy-eyed incomprehension. He tore strips of scaly material away from her mouth and chin, ripped the masklike deposit from her nose and eyes. He bared the pallid face of a beautiful young girl—the face of Jaqueline Hayes, the missing heiress!

SHE couldn't speak. He saw that her mind wasn't working. Her restless movements came from a mere subconscious, animal instinct to escape. But Ronson was grimly elated. He had solved one of the strangest kidnap mysteries of the age. He'd found the girl who'd been snatched and put on display as a freak—while the police of the entire country searched in vain for her.

He stepped back suddenly, away from the door, and pulled the girl with him. The hammering outside had stopped. There was a sinister quiet. Then Ronson heard a low voice giving a quick order.

He had a swift premonition of danger, drew out his gun. He gave the girl a shove that carried her to the wall across the room and sent her sprawling. He dropped himself as bullets thudded through the panels of the door. Lead screamed above him. Splinters lashed at his face like clawing demons. Lew Ronson twisted and fired back.

His gun made a deafening thunder in the room. Cordite stung his nostrils. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the firing outside ceased. He waited, puzzled, and an instant later caught his breath.

A streak of light appeared under the door. He heard a hiss of flames, felt sudden heat. He rose, ran swiftly toward the room's one window and found it barred with iron. The room was like a prison, and Humbolt was menacing them with the red fangs of fire.

Ronson leaped to the girl's side and lifted her quickly. He held her with his left arm, hoisted her strangely disguised body up to his shoulder. Then he turned and plunged toward the burning door. His right shoulder struck it. It shivered, opened, spouted a whirling geyser of oil-fed flames in his face.

He choked, fell back, eyebrows singed, skin blistering. But there was no other way. He ran forward once more, leaped through the flaming barrier, carrying the girl. But, as he did so, he let his body sink to the floor of the corridor outside, then slid forward with the girl on top of him.

He was just in time. Pinpoints of light showed to the left of him. The winking eye of an automatic glimmered, and bullets fanned the air so close that for one brief instant he was afraid the girl had been hit.

With savage fierceness he jerked his own gun up. Humbolt had thought to to drive him out, catch him, shoot him down as he leaped through the flames.

Only Ronson's quick action in falling had saved his life and the girl's. He fired with the hot fury of a man filled with hate—of Humbolt, master of twisted lives, who had even got his freaks to help him in the murder of Kelly and the kidnaping of the girl.

He felt fierce joy as a scream sounded from the spot where his bullets had slapped. The other's firing ceased. Ronson lifted the girl again, plunged forward and saw by the light of the dancing flames behind him, that Humbolt had slumped against the wall, his shoulder broken. Humbolt tried to grab his fallen gun with his left hand, but Ronson kicked it viciously from him.

He paused a moment, staring down at the wounded killer. Then he turned, for the building was menaced now. The fire that Humbolt had set in the hall was spreading, licking up the wall. Frightened freaks were screaming through the flamerent night.

Ronson ran to the front of the building, out through the exhibition room, into the arcade, where he smashed a window. Through it, he lifted the girl to the sidewalk. Then he went back, grabbed Humbolt by the collar and dragged him, moaning, out to the street.

A cop ran up. Ronson shouted quick orders. "Get the wagon—and the engines." He flashed his G-man's badge, and the cop ran off.

Ronson, gun in hand, helped shoo the freaks out of the burning building, and rounded them up outside. He didn't know how many of them were guilty of aiding Humbolt in his ghastly plot of kidnaping and murder. He didn't care, just now.

Sirens of fire engines and police cars filled the air with clamor a moment later. An ambulance clanged up. Police Chief Bragg arrived in a big headquarters car.

THe girl and Humbolt were rushed to a hospital. Ronson and Bragg accompanied them in another car, and on the way, Bragg asked a question:

"What made you go back to the freak show, fella, after the rest of us had searched and thought the girl wasn't there?"

"Eyes!" said Ronson quickly. "Eyes that didn't look right."

"Yeah? How's that?"

"The Reptile lady! There was something about her that didn't register on me when I first saw her, but clicked later. When I lighted a cigarette in front of her the flare of the match didn't make her pupils smaller, the way it would yours or mine. They stayed like marbles—big, because she was doped. Humbolt fed her stuff, besides sticking those scales on her. When I thought of it, I couldn't figure why a freak should be drugged."

"Yeah, but don't tell me, fella, that it was just the girl's eyes made you think Humbolt had her. A snatch victim disguised as a freak is something too novel to jump at."

"Eyes again," said Ronson, "the eyes of cameras. Humbolt knew those ticket stubs could be checked on, if the missing pieces were found; so he destroyed them. And he must have known that the paper those photomat machines use is all the same kind—just as you found. Otherwise, he'd have taken pains to destroy those pictures in Kelly's pocket.

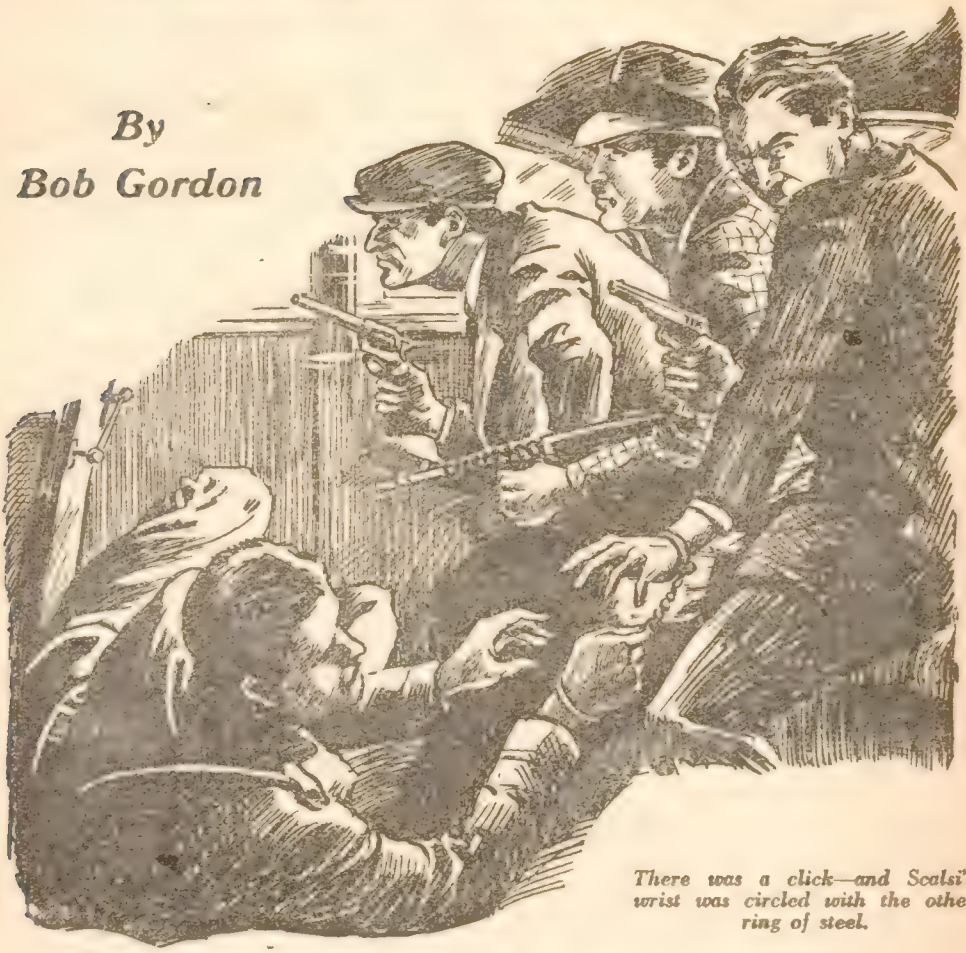
What Humbolt didn't know is that the eye of almost every camera has individual kinks—bubbles, dust, small imperfections in grinding—you find 'em on every low-grade lens. They affect the focus of the picture, make spots and uneven depth around the edges. They didn't show in those small-size prints; but when I enlarged them in my room, with a projection machine, along with others I'd taken on every photomat in town, I found that Kelly and the girl had been to Humbolt's. Their print defects checked with the ones of myself I snapped in his arcade.

I knew he was lying, then, about not seeing her—and I had a reason for being sure. I got to thinking again of the eyes of the Reptile Lady, and why she might be doped. Eyes did it, Bragg—eyes and a little action."

*Cuffy Carlson, the rookie cop, had a passion for putting the wristlets on even the most anaemic suspect he brought in. But he proved his courage when he was prisoner in a murder car packed with kill-crazy hoods, by still using those pet hand-shackles—though he knew he was making them his . . . .*

# Suicide Bracelets

*By*
*Bob Gordon*



*There was a click—and Scalsi's wrist was circled with the other ring of steel.*

SERGEANT BOYER strode slowly down the corridor of the Orrinville police station, running a practiced eye over the spotless, snug-fitting whipcord of the dozen patrolmen lined up for inspection.

He paused before the last man in the line, placed his hands on his hips, and frowned. He frowned because the muscular figure in front of him bulked bigger and trimmer and more erect, than the other eleven cops. He frowned because the gleam on the shield and buttons was brighter, because the glaze on the black Sam Browne belt and puttees was more mirrorlike than even his own. He frowned because he could find no fault with the rookie, when it was a tradition of the

force that rookies be razzed—supposed to be good for them. Oh well, he could always fall back on the same old gag.

He winked broadly for the benefit of the others, and demanded: "Got your handcuffs with you this morning, Carlson?"

"Cuffy" Carlson kept his eyes straight to the front, and said: "Yes, sir!"

Grins spread over eleven stolid faces.

"And how about the key?"

"I have that, too."

"Then," said the sergeant, "we will clean out the jail and make ready for a rush of new business. That is all. Go to your posts, men."

Guffaws filled the corridor as the eight-to-four watch broke ranks and started for the door. The pair that followed Carlson out spoke loudly for his benefit:

"That was funny—Cuffy's first arrest. He grabbed a dame for shop-lifting. She didn't weigh more than a hundred and ten, but Cuffy made her wear the bracelets."

"Yeah," remembered the other, "and even then his face was all scratched up. He musta thought he'd tackled a wildcat."

Carlson's big ears burned, but he pretended not to hear as he strode down Second Street.

"And the time—" the teller doubled up in mirth and slapped his thigh—"when he pinched the Western Union boy what went through a red light on his bicycle and knocked down an old lady. An' the kid was only about sixteen and scared stiff. He rang a box on that, an' when the wagon got there Cuffy couldn't find the key, so he left his post an' rode in. Wanted to get the cuffs back, so he'd be ready for the next crime wave."

They pounded each other's backs and haw-hawed, like mules at feeding time.

Carlson turned and waited until they drew abreast. "You should talk!" he told the last speaker. "You were going to be the big he-man when you collared those two mugs in the Bijou stickup, so you kept your cuffs on your belt. The third fellow jumped you—and all three got away. And you, Salzman, let a dip break away from you. Then you had to shoot him; he's still in the hospital. I'll keep on using my cuffs. You guys use your meat hooks, and we'll keep score. I haven't lost any prisoners yet."

"Aw, keep your shirt on, Cuffy!" Salzman said. "Can't you take a little razzin'?"

Carlson grinned. "Been taking it for six months, but you ought to lay off after a while. I haven't used the bracelets for a couple of weeks."

"Okay, Cuffy!"

They turned up Main, toward their posts, and Carlson continued on. He was across the street when Salzman yelled: "Hey, you lug, you ain't made a pinch in two weeks, neither!"

THE big green sedan, doors ajar on the curb side, was parked in front of the First National Bank. There was a law against that, so Cuffy Carlson stuck a couple of knotty-knuckled thumbs under his Sam Browne and ambled over.

"You'll have to move on, buddy," he said to the blond, gangling youth behind the wheel.

The kid bit his lip and turned a little pale. He raced the purring motor with a nervous toe and cast a haunted glance past the officer. The morning was chilly, but the hairless lip had a beady mustache of sweat.

"Wasn't goin' to be but a minute," he protested. "I was just waitin' for a guy."

Carlson shook his head tolerantly. "Better drive around the block."

Something hard jammed into his back. A voice behind him, low and harsh, said: "Keep your mitts down, flatfoot, and get in the back seat."

Fingers fumbled at his hip, and he no longer felt the weight of his service .38. Then the kid lifted his hand, and it had a gun in it.

Carlson cursed silently and climbed into the back seat. The door burst open, and out ran two snarling, tense-faced men, who faced the dozen startled passers-by with leveled, menacing automatics. One carried a dirty pillow slip, which bulged with bundles of bank notes.

A third figure, older and darker and more vicious-looking than the others,

backed through the door, both hands gripping a Thompson sub-machine gun that kicked and barked a stuttering farewell of flame and lead. A woman on the sidewalk opened her mouth and screamed. The barking muzzle swung her way, and the scream was chopped off suddenly as her face disappeared in a smear of red.

"All right, boys," the killer shouted, "let's scram!"

They sprinted for the green sedan, and it leaped away with a rising whine of gears before they could find their seats. Two rode in front and three in back, while Cuffy Carlson was kicked and punched and crammed down on the floor at their feet.

"The flatfoot busted in, so I thought we'd better bring him along," the lookout who had captured Carlson explained. "Hope he owes the other cops money—might keep 'em from throwin' lead our way. Nothin' like a live flatfoot hangin' over the runnin' board to stop his pals from shootin' if they get too close to us."

The youngster at the wheel added. "He said we couldn't park in front of the bank, Scalsi. Lotta laughs in this business."

Carlson turned and looked up at the machine gunner, who constantly stepped on his hands. "So you're Salvatore Scalsi, Public Enemy Number Six—or is it Seven?" His voice etched Scalsi's ears with the biting acid of contempt. "For shooting down a scared lady, you ought to get a better rating."

Scalsi slashed down with the muzzle of the Tommy-gun, and a purple egg began to rise behind Carlson's ear. "Yeah. I'm Scalsi," he snarled. "Better take a good look, 'cause it's the last thing you're goin' to see."

Carlson tried to find an easier position among the feet, and cracked: "A rat like you would be the last thing anybody would want to see. Who are the other vermin?"

Scalsi kicked upward with a patent-leather toe as the sedan careened around a curve. The kick went wild. He laughed, a strained, high-pitched laugh, and said: "Guys, the flattie ain't been properly interdooced."

The dour-faced man in the middle, watching anxiously through the rear window, uttered, "Nuts!"

"That was Cokey Weiss," Scalsi explained. "The guy mixin' his dogs with yours is Tony Liuzza. Y'ain't thanked him for invitin' yuh on the ride, yet. The kid toolin' this bus is Whitey Sundburg, and the other guy up front is Patsy Pouleminous."

"Can it, Sal, can it!" Weiss growled. "Next, you'll be want' we should get mugged and our fingerprints took."

"Aw, what the hell!" Scalsi protested. "In five minutes this guy'll be so full of lead he won't remember nuthin'."

The speedometer hung at eighty as the green sedan ate up the white, straight ribbon of concrete, but the wail of a siren rose suddenly above the rush of wind.

"Jeez, the cops!"

Whitey saw a black speck on the dancing white streak in his rear-vision mirror. Eight other eyes were turned to look back.

Carlson flashed a hand to his belt and unhooked his cuffs. Unseen, he snapped one bracelet over his own right wrist. Then he reached out and pinched Scalsi's ankle—hard.

Scalsi spat an oath and reached his left hand down. There was a flash and a click, and his wrist was circled with the other shiny ring of steel.

Scalsi kicked out viciously. "Why you—"

Carlson's arm whipped up toward the open window. He grinned up at Scalsi, said:

"And there goes the key!"

Scalsi's curses were cut short by a rising scream of the siren.

"Push that can!" he bellowed at Whitey.

"I'm giving her all she's got!"

"Then give 'em smoke!"

Sundburg reached under the dash, and black clouds vomited from the exhaust.

"That oughta hold 'em," Liuzza observed.

Carlson dragged on Scalsi's wrist with the cuff. "And this ought to hold you, rat!"

Weiss tore his eyes from behind, and for the first time saw the linked wrists.

"Want I should plug him?" he asked, prodding with his automatic.

Scalsi's voice had an hysterical ring. "And have me draggin' a corpse around? Be yourself!"

SUNDBURG kept his foot down hard on the next turn. Rubber screeched. The rear wheels went to the edge of the gravel shoulder with a sickening swerve. The driver wrenched the wheel and dabbed at the brake, and the sedan shot across the road, while white, tense-knuckled hands grabbed and throats closed.

The car lurched back on the concrete, skidding. A rear tire, punished to the limit, burst with a bang. Fighting the wheel with desperate skill, Whitey kept the car upright as it crashed through a rickety board-rail fence and bogged to a stop in a freshly plowed field.

Scared and shaken, but unhurt, the six piled out of the wrecked sedan. A patch of woods, shimmering green in its new spring dress, hugged the other side of the field a hundred yards away.

"Over there!" Scalsi ordered. "They'll be here in a minute."

Guns jabbed into Carlson's ribs. He stood his ground, and said: "I'm not moving."

Swirling, vicious lights danced in Scalsi's eyes as he hissed: "Listen sap, I got nothin' to lose if I kill you. I got hot squats in six states waitin' for me already. Do you come along and do what you're told, or do I blow your belly through your backbone— right now?"

Carlson saw that he meant it—saw murder in his eyes and his twitching trigger finger, and he said: "I'll go."

Scalsi traded his Tommy-gun for Liuzza's automatic. "I can handle this better with one hand," he explained.

He swung the sack of loot toward Carlson's free hand with a brusque command to, "Carry that!"

They tried to sprint over fresh-turned furrows, but city shoes caked with the soft earth and grew heavy. Carlson carried on a flirtation with death by hanging back as much as he dared. They reached the edge of the woods, breathless, as the police car skidded to a stop on the road. They ducked behind trees when the two scouts and the patrolmen opened a futile fire.

"Hell!" said Weiss, aiming the Tommy-gun. "We got nothin' to worry about. I can fog the bulls down with this, an' we can cop their car."

"Don't be a sap," Scalsi cautioned. "The whole town will be here in a couple minutes. Give 'em a burst every now and then, to make 'em keep their heads down, till me an' this flattie find a place to hide. Then the rest of you beat it the other way down that path. Keep shootin' every minute or two, so's they'll follow you. You can glom onto a car when you hit the next road. When the posse's gone past, I'll swipe one of their chariots an' make this bull drive.

Pouleminous reached for the money.

Scalsi told him: "I'll keep that—then you birds'll do a good job of decoyin' the mob away from me."

The posse arrived, but slowly, a carload at a time. Attracted by the running gun fight, they streamed to the right, down the wooded lane which the four hoods had taken. Linked together, Scalsi and Carlson watched, saw that guards remained with cars along the road, and edged cautiously to the left where the underbrush was thickest. Carlson carried the loot and warily watched the muzzle always trained on his belly.

THEY came to a two-strand, barbed wire fence skirting an unpaved country road.

"You go first," Scalsi ordered.

Carlson parted the strands and ducked between them, remaining stooped while Scalsi followed him with eye and gun. There was an instant when, with one leg through, Scalsi had to grasp the lower wire with his gun-hand and swing his body sidewise to clear the barbs. At that instant Carlson dropped the money and threw all his weight against the cuffs. The steel bit into his wrist, but it bit into Scalsi's bony arm too. The pull brought Scalsi flying through the fence, sprawling and cursing and shooting blindly.

Carlson planted both feet and leaned against the weight chained to his wrist; then pinwheeled, grabbing the link of the bracelets with his other hand and heaving both arms every time the plunging, floundering Scalsi brought his right hand up to aim. And every time Scalsi aimed, the shot went wild, for he was snapped on the end of his cuffed arm as though by the lash of a whip.

One of Scalsi's desperate shots nicked the shoulder strap of Carlson's uniform, and chipped the glossy surface of the leather cross-piece of the Sam Browne beneath. Carlson stopped his wheeling, and rubbed the wrist that was rapidly swelling under the handcuff. Scalsi rose to one knee after his last headlong plunge into the grass and drew a careful bead on Carlson's middle, three feet away.

Carlson wiped his brow and laughed. "Think I can't count?"

The action of the automatic clicked harmlessly on an empty chamber.

Little rivers of sweat trickled down the lines of futile hatred etched in Scalsi's face. His wide nostrils flared, and his lips quivered as he gasped for air. He didn't resist when Carlson reached over and pocketed the gun. He seemed glad to have that hand free to rub his aching wrist and shoulder.

A moving cloud of dust came around the corner of the dirt road, preceded by a fast-moving, grimy touring car, with top up and curtains flapping.

"Here comes a ride," Carlson said, yanking on the cuff. "Let's you and this money go back to Orrinville and get locked up."

Scalsi winced and painfully got to his feet. Carlson stuffed handfuls of currency back in the pillow slip, then waved down the oncoming car. With the dusty windshield reflecting the late morning sun, he couldn't see the driver, but he could think of no one except a down-at-the-heel farmer driving such a bus.

But when the car squealed to a stop, he found himself looking into the excitement-mad eyes of Whitey Sundburg, and into the muzzle of a nickeled .32. And other guns and other leering, snarling faces popped from under quickly raised curtains.

Despite the thwarted, helpless gripping in his chest, Carlson masked his face with a sheepish grin, and said: "Give us a lift, mister?"

"Clear to hell!" Liuzza offered as he opened the door.

Carlson bowed. "Thanks, mister, I've never been in your town."

"Can the cracks and climb in."

ORRINVILLE to National City is normally a two-hour drive. Back roads, long detours to avoid guarded bridges, and a car as full of squeaks as sparrows at sunrise, delayed things more than a little; so it was after dark when the five hoods rattled into the suburbs with frayed nerves, an unwelcome hostage, and seventy thousand dollars in assorted currency.

"To the hangout for eats and to divide the dough?" Weiss suggested hopefully.

"To my place first for a drink and a doctor," Scalsi countered, "an I'm going to get loose of this copper if I have to cut his arm off. Now. Blindfold him before we go any farther."

Weiss said: "I could thumb his eyes out and have myself a lot of fun."

"Tie his peepers up with a nose rag," Scalsi roared. "Every time we've tried to rough him up, he's twisted them bracelets till my arm's practically broke. You can have your fun when we cut him loose."

They entered Scalsi's place from the alley, climbing a narrow stairway to the second floor. Whether stiff from jouncing on the floor of the car all day, or merely to torment his captors, Carlson stumbled on every step and dragged his weight against Scalsi's arm. Scalsi interspersed groans with curses, but dared not retaliate. That was to come later.

Flossie, Scalsi's muchly blondined, plumpish moll, greeted them red-eyed at the door, near hysteria from suspense. She pouted of a dinner kept warm for hours, and Scalsi pushed her away and demanded a drink. They all wanted a drink. They all had several.

All had different ideas of where they could get a locksmith they could trust to

loosen the handcuffs. And while they harrassed Flossie with directions and wrong numbers to call, Carlson reached into his pocket for something, which he dropped, unnoticed, behind the divan.

They didn't find their locksmith. A new mob in National City, their connections were not so good. Stickup mobs don't run to lock-picking. It's simpler to blast their way in with rods.

"I know the guy what works downstairs," Whitey Sundburg volunteered. "He's a good mechanic—he'll have tools."

"Why the hell didn't you say so before?"

Too tired to resent Scalsi's peevishness, Whitey explained. "He can't unlock the cuffs, but he can cut the link, so you won't be tied to the cop."

"Get him."

Whitey found the young fellow, who hemmed and hawed—didn't want to get mixed up in anything—until they made his eyes pop with a hundred-dollar bill.

"C'mon downstairs," he invited.

Whitey acted as guard—held a gun on the still blindfolded Carlson, while he and Scalsi followed the fellow to the basement.

A sulphureous gas that made them all cough filled the cellar.

"How the hell can you work down here?" Scalsi asked.

"It ain't bad when I turn the blower on," the mechanic replied, as he turned a switch that started fans set in openings high up in the outside walls.

UPSTAIRS, dinner for six sizzled on the stove, and filled the apartment with an hungry man's favorite perfume.

"How long before we eat?" Whitey asked eagerly. "I'm starved—an' I want some of that toast Flossie makes instead o' givin' us plain bread."

"Be on the table when you and Weiss get back," Scalsi told him.

"Whad'ye mean, 'back'?" Weiss growled. "I ain't goin' no place 'til I chow up."

"You're goin' to run this flattie across the bridge and fill him full of holes. Did he stick around a minute longer he'd spoil my appetite."

Carlson stood and stretched—worked the circulation back into his freed arm, and wondered why he felt only sore and hungry, but not afraid. Nerves hardened by the menace he had faced all day, he no longer had to assume a nonchalant air.

"Isn't it the custom to feed condemned men?" he asked.

"Like something hot in your belly?" Weiss countered, prodding him toward the door.

Carlson whiffed the aroma of broiling beefsteak, and said: "Would I?"

"You'll get it!" Weiss snarled. "Get a bellyful of red hot lead."

They used Whitey's car, parked out in the alley.

Weiss got in the back seat and dangled a gun over his knee in the general direction of the blindfolded Carlson, who sat at the other end of the seat.

"Make it snappy," he told Whitey. "We gotta get back before chow gets cold. Turn left after you cross Highway Bridge. We'll dump him on the first side road."

"Oke!"

Whitey let in the clutch and swung out of the alley.

They rode in silence for a mile, then Weiss said to Carlson: "Too bad we're in such a hurry. I'd like to work on you a while before I put you to sleep."

"Oh, yes! Throw that rod away, and let's see who works on who!"

Weiss reached over silently and slashed the gun muzzle across Carlson's cheek. Carlson tore the handkerchief from his eyes and leaned toward his tormenter.

"Sit back!" Weiss snarled. "We're in the park now. I'd as soon plug you here."

Carlson looked around, saw that the speeding car was nearing the bridge approach. He had not long to live. There was just one chance. He raised up and clutched the door handle. Weiss grabbed a handful of coat tail, and pulled. Off balance, Carlson was yanked back in the seat.

"Go faster," Weiss yelled at Whitey. "This monkey wants to jump."

"Right!" Whitey jabbed viciously at the throttle and the car screamed around

the last turn before entering the long Highway Bridge. Then he turned his head to size up the situation in the rear seat.

A swinging red light appeared suddenly ahead. A gong clanged dimly through the closed windows. The sedan was doing an easy fifty.

"Turn around and watch your driving." Weiss's shout ended in a hoarse scream as he leaned forward. He had suddenly sighted the open draw just ahead.

With the gun off him an instant, Carlson sprang forward and planted a cluster of knuckles under Whitey's ear.

The shriek of locked tires died as suddenly as it was born. The zebra-striped safety gate bent in a futile argument with onrushing steel, then snapped off short and sailed over the railing. The startled bridge tender swallowed a well-minced cud of cut plug as the sedan flashed past his cabin window, then with bulging eyes watched it leap into space.

Maybe it was Weiss' muffled scream, maybe it was the sight of that mighty splash, or maybe it was that wad of tobacco curdling in his stomach; but he felt a little sick as he grabbed the canvas-covered cork ring from its rack and ran to the edge of the open draw.

Weiss had raised half out of the seat when he saw it coming, to stand poised and screaming until he lurched forward to bash his head through the windshield. The lights went out for Whitey at almost the same instant he had sensed the danger. Silent, he took the shock behind the wheel. Carlson ducked behind the front seat as soon as he had landed his blow, bracing his shoulder and reaching for the door handle. The latch clicked as the car started its plunge. One quick push, and the resisting water did the rest—wrenched the handle from Carlson's hand and bent the door back on strained hinges.

Black waters poured through the opening, seeking to tear his fingers from their sudden grip on the door jamb. Carlson closed his throat over that last lungful of air and held on against the inrushing river. By the time the radiator had settled into the mud at the bottom, the interior of the sedan had filled and only the pressure of fourteen feet of water combated his struggles. With an elbow and then a knee behind the edge of the door, Carlson kicked free, then with lungs bursting and heart pounding he straightened out and broke surface.

His first breath was a gasp; his second, a shout. The goggle-eyed bridge tender, jolted out of his sudden trance, yelled, "Hey there!" and tossed his cork life-ring at the sound. It fell short, but in two strokes Carlson was clutching it.

THE National City police thought Carlson should go to the hospital, and Carlson thought loudly, and at length, that he shouldn't; so Carlson didn't go to the hospital. Instead, he got the loan of some dry clothes, a bit of cash and a service .38 with some extra cartridges. The single cuff on his wrist could wait, since they couldn't find a key to fit it. He wanted them to help him look for Scalsi right then. They asked him if he could direct them to the hideout.

"It's a place with a peculiar smell of sulphur in the cellar," Carlson told them.

"And molasses?" asked the local police lieutenant. "It's spring, you know."

The Scalsi gang hadn't long been operating from National City, and their hideout was unknown. "Otherwise, we'd have dragged 'em in long ago," the lieutenant proclaimed.

It looked as if there were no immediate help there, so Carlson went out on his own hook.

"I'll give it a try before I go back and let the gang razz me over this cuff," he told himself, eyeing his wrist ruefully. He entered a corner drug store.

"What is it," he asked the pharmacist, "that smells like sulphur fumes—makes you cough—yet isn't burning sulphur?"

"Could it be sulphur dioxide gas?"

"Well, could it? What kind of a machine would it be used in, saying it was?"

"It's the cooling gas found in most electric refrigerators."

Carlson clapped the pharmacist's shoulder. "Buddy, you're a life saver—in assorted flavors," he beamed. "Where's your classified phone book?"

*"Refrigerators — Electric — Serviced,"* was the heading in the book. The list was too long to copy, so he tore out the page.

The taxi driver didn't bat an eye when Carlson handed him the list and told him to take them all in, using his own judgement as to the order, so long as he didn't miss any. The driver knew they would be closed at night, but what the hell! A fare's a fare, and the goofier they come, the better they pay.

It was behind the eighth place, or maybe the ninth, that Carlson found the rattletrap touring car in the alley. It was a two-story building, dark below, but with lights shining through curtained windows upstairs.

Carlson scribbled a note on the directory page and handed it to the Jehu, along with five dollars.

"Phone this message to police headquarters," he said, "and make it snappy."

Flossie answered his knock by asking through the door: "Who's there, Patsy and Tony?"

"Yeh!" Carlson aped the voice he had listened to all afternoon.

The door opened. Flossie barely had time to start a scream before Carlson clapped a heavy hand over her mouth. A littered closet was open just inside the hall. Carlson fairly hurled her into it, slammed the door shut and turned the key.

Scalsi, wakened from a boozy sleep, appeared at the bedroom door, gun in hand. His wits were foggy—Carlson's alert. Carlson fired first, and fired low. He wanted his quarry alive. Scalsi yowled dismally, like a hound at choir practice, as the slug nicked his foot, and leaped back into the room.

Patsy Pouleminous and Tony Liuzza were returning from the corner store with fresh quarts of whiskey, after a futile search for a crooked locksmith, when they saw Carlson pay off the cabby and enter the building. They didn't recognize him as Carlson, whose death they deemed was long overdue, but they were anxious because Whitey and Weiss were gone so long. They knew the heat would be on, so they were wary. Carlson, even in borrowed civvies, bulked like a cop. They divided forces to investigate.

Carlson was stalking the slightly wounded Scalsi, and Scalsi was waiting behind the dresser in his room, with a bead drawn on the door.

THERE was the squeaking of a window in the kitchen as Pouleminous raised it from the fire escape. Carlson held his breath and listened, while a cold dew popped on his forehead. Then he let the wind out with a relieved sigh. The kitchen door was the next one past the bedroom. At least, he could cover both danger points from this end of the hall.

Flossie chose that instant to pound on the closet door, and demand: "Let me out!"

Pouleminous, crouching breathless in the kitchen, yelled: "Whatsa matter in there?"

Scalsi answered: "Watch it, Patsy! It's that lousy flatfoot!"

Patsy, remembering his prearranged signal with Liuzza, fired two quick shots through the kitchen door. Flossie took that as a signal to pound and scream some more.

Liuzza, listening at the apartment entrance, thought that would be a good time to sneak a peek, so pushing the door open silently, he risked an eye to peer into the hall. A dozen feet away he saw Carlson crouching behind the umbrella stand and looking the other way. Carlson heard only Flossie's racket behind him, and remained facing the known danger.

Liuzza stuck his gun inside, and said: "Hoist 'em!"

In the split second it took him to glance over his shoulder, Carlson thought things out—rather his instinct leaped to logical conclusions. He was trapped. He could fight it out, or he could surrender and hope the police would get there in time.

He compromised. He lifted his hands slowly, but hung onto the gun. If they meant to shoot him down at once, he'd hang on to that fighting chance. If they wanted to rough him up, or take him on another ride—well, he'd have a better chance; for the local police would be

pounding their way up soon. If he shot it out, he might kill Scalsi, whom he wanted to take back in cuffs, so he raised his hands.

Liuzza stepped inside, and demanded: "Drop that rod!"

Carlson let the .38 clatter to the floor and backed slowly. Patsy popped through the kitchen door. Scalsi pushed from behind the dresser and limped out into the hall.

"I don't know how the hell you got loose from the boys," Scalsi rasped, "but I'm glad you did. There ain't nothin' would give me more fun than to see you grabbin' at your guts from some of my own personal brand of lead. And boy, you're goin' to get it, an' get it so you die slow—like I've felt I've been doin' since you hooked this damn' bracelet onto me." He held out a swollen arm still ringed with steel.

Then, to the others: "Push him in the kitchen till I tie up this foot he nicked."

"Better hurry," Liuzza warned. "There might be some cops on the way."

"Won't take but a minute," Scalsi said, with the stubbornness of a man who's had a few drinks too many. "Get me a towel."

They backed Carlson against the kitchen table. With his hands behind him, his fingers touched something metallic. He ran his fingers over it—an electric toaster. He picked up a piece of cold, butter-greasy toast. Although he had not eaten for a long time, he was not hungry—but he munched at the stiff toast.

Liuzza growled: "Drop that, you punk. We don't feed rats around here!"

Carlson dropped the burned bread. His hand was greasy, so he lowered it to wipe the butter off on his pants. His fingers contacted three of the extra cartridges for the gun he had borrowed. Nuts! What good were they, without the gat? Carlson thought a minute, and again he fumbled around with the toast and the toaster.

Liuzza heard him, turned around from watching Scalsi bandage his foot, and snarled: "At it again, eh? Get away from there, yuh mut!"

Carlson backed away from the kitchen table.

SECONDS seemed like hours. Finally Scalsi was satisfied with the clumsy first aid to his foot.

"Out in the alley with him," he rasped. "Don't want no more blood up here. I'm going to plug him myself, then you two can find a place to dump him while Flossie and I scram. You got your dough. I'll hang onto the other shares 'til I hear what happened to Whitey and Weiss. Meet me in a week in Chicago."

As they herded Carlson past the closet door, Flossie increased the clamor of her pounding.

"Let her stay till we get through," Scalsi said. "She's a pest when she's mad, and boy, she's boiling now!"

They started down the stairs. Pouleminous led. Then came Carlson, with Liuzza beside him. The limping Scalsi brought up the rear.

Carlson dragged each step—waiting. Would he get the break for which he was waiting.

"You fellows don't think you're going to get away with this, do you?" he stalled, stopping halfway down the steps.

"And why not?" Scalsi's voice carried more assurance than he really felt. This cop had been a Jonah to him all day.

"Because about twenty nice, tough policemen are scheduled to bust in here, if I'm not safely outside in ten minutes," Carlson told them, hoping it was the truth. "Time's about up."

"Nuts!" Liuzza sneered without conviction.

Just then, with startling suddenness, three roars blasted through the air and merged into one ear-ringing crash.

The hoods felt their bones turn to water. They turned and stood dazed for a second.

But Carlson went into action at once. He lashed out with a kick that hurtled Pouleminous down the gloomy stairs. The force of the kick carried Carlson past Liuzza, who fired instinctively. The slug passed through the tails of Carlson's coat.

Planting his kicking foot two steps down, Carlson grabbed at Liuzza's gun-

hand and wrenched it over his shoulder, following the motion through with a swift, forward bend of his body. That sent Liuzza hurtling over his shoulder in a flying mare.

Scalsi recovered his startled wits and fired down the steps—two shots, both of which drilled through the catapulting body of Liuzza. Liuzza screamed once and died—in mid-air.

Carlson's sudden, forward motion could not be stopped. As he turned Liuzza's wrist loose, he ducked his head and took the fall rolling.

Patsy's sprawling tumble had barely been halted at the bottom of the steps, when the full weight of Liuzza's hurtling body hit him—knocked him breathless. Then Carlson's weight landed on the writhing mass and rolled off, out of range of Scalsi's gun.

THE outside door burst open and uniformed cops filled the hall, shooting at the flames spurting from the head of the stairs. Scalsi, screaming futile, baffled curses, turned back to the apartment. Other cops, streaming through the fire-escape window, appeared at the kitchen door.

Trapped, with one shot still in his gun, Scalsi raised a pair of trembling arms.

They went into the sitting room to call an ambulance for Liuzza, who needed no ambulance.

Carlson stooped behind the divan and came up with a tiny key. He unlocked the cuff on his own wrist, then approached the thoroughly subdued Scalsi and reached for the bracelet on his left arm.

"Do you mind?" he asked as he inserted the key.

"How did that get behind there?" Scalsi asked, chagrin and amazement struggling with the sullen rage in his eyes.

"I dropped it when you first brought me in" Carlson said, grinning.

"You had the key on you? And I could have got loose from you any time? I thought you threw the key away right at first, out the window of the car."

"I hoped you would." Carlson laughed.

"What did you say your name was again?" the police lieutenant interrupted, starting to make notes for his report.

"Carlson's the name. They call me Cuffy." He turned a grin at Scalsi. "And my favorite pastime is warming up cartridges in electric toasters, so they'll go *bang, bang, bang*—and scare a buncha rats enough to give me time to kick their brains out."

The lieutenant shook his head in pity. He thought Carlson had got rather punch-goofy from having been in too much of a fracus.

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# Borrowed Evidence

## No. 33. Clues that Caught Criminals

### *A True Crime Story*

### *By Cliff Howe*

A KILLER'S car crept up to the little farm of William Ryder on the Croton Dam Road near Ossining, N. Y., on the night of March 19th, 1932.

It seemed a risky spot for banditry or murder. The grim gray walls of Sing Sing Prison, behind which so many human wolves had ended their lives in the electric chair, were close at hand. But the four in the car had the reckless confidence of criminals.

Darkness hid their faces. Only their eyes showed, glittering, greedy, evil. They had a motive for being there. William Ryder, hard-working and thrifty, ran a small, but successful, cider mill—and was rumored to be wealthy. There were stories going the rounds that he often carried large rolls of bills in his pockets.

The four men waited till Ryder, seeing the headlights of their car, came to the door. Then one of them called out: "We'd like to buy some cider."

Customers often came to Ryder's place late in the evening, so he felt no suspicions. He got his hat and coat, went out, climbed on the running board and told the strangers to drive up the road a couple of hundred feet to the building where he kept his cider. They did. Ryder filled the jug the strangers gave him, and said his price was fifty cents a gallon.

One of them tried a bit of strategy, to see how much of a roll the cider dealer was carrying. "I've got a small check here, pal," he said to Ryder. "How about cashing it?"

"Sorry," said Ryder. "I'd rather not do it!"

"Okey, I've got a ten-dollar bill. Can you change that, buddy?"

"Sure." Ryder's hand dived in his pants pocket, came out clutching a fat roll of greenbacks.

They took one look and didn't even give him a chance to peel it. Gunshots thundered suddenly, stabbing the night with flame. Slugs buried themselves in Ryder's body. He fell, gasping, swearing, spilling the bills on the ground.

They waited only long enough to gather up the money. A moment later, their big car went roaring away into the darkness, leaving Ryder to stare after it with glazing eyes. He could not even see the license number, for the four men had taken the trouble to remove the rear-end bulb.

He crawled painfully back to the farmhouse, calling weakly. But his family, who had the radio going, couldn't hear him. They hadn't heard the shots, either. Not until Ryder, white-faced, his coat soaked with crimson, came staggering up the back steps, did they learn of the holdup. Then it was too late. Ryder was nearly dead. The bandits were far away.

It was a strange case. The only witness, Ryder himself, was unable to give any worthwhile information. Clues seemed absent.

But New York's famous state police were rushed to the scene of the shooting. In fast cars and on thundering motorcycles, gray-uniformed troopers from the barracks of Troop K, stationed at the village of Hawthorne, sped over night roads toward the Ryder farmstead.

Captain Nagell, Sergeant La Forge, Troopers Crodell, Kelly and others, all of Troop K, flung themselves grimly into the work of investigation. They hoped to find valuable clues, in the form of footprints near the cider cellar where Ryder had fallen. But the ground here was trampled too badly by other customers of Ryder. The footprints they found were indistinct, unidentifiable.

TROOPERS roped off the road and began a careful search along the whole Ryder property. They were rewarded by finding tire tracks where a heavy car had waited. In one place, the tracks were clearly visible. Captain Nagell had photographs made of these, then plaster impressions. Sergeant La Forge set off up the highway, in

the direction Ryder had said the bandits vanished. He went slowly, flashing his light, examining every foot of the road surface.

About half a mile from the Ryder farm, around a bend in the highway, he again found imprints of the heavy car. It looked to him as though the bandits had waited here for some reason, perhaps till they were sure it was dark enough for their sinister work.

He stooped, picked up something from the mud beside the highway. It was the well-smoked butt of a cigarette. Sergeant La Forge was able to make out the brand.

That night the troopers combed the roads and highways around the Ryder farm, but uncovered nothing further. When morning came the tire markings and cigarette butt were still their only clues. They hoped Ryder himself might rally and give out some more information. He did come out of his coma for a short time; but he was even more hazy than before, in giving details of his attackers. Shortly afterwards, as he was being operated upon, he died. The murderers' slugs had done their work.

The troopers went on with their hunt for the criminals more determinedly than ever. Gray-clad men from the Hawthorne barracks asked endless questions of tire dealers, showed their plaster cast of the markings and learned the brand of the mystery car's tires. That helped but little. Thousands of such tires had been sold in that section of New York.

The clue of the treads was temporarily dropped. Sergeant La Forge began hunting down all the people in the community who knew Ryder. And during the course of his inquiries, he ran across a bit of startling information.

A young man named Wilson, who lived near the Ryder farm, had been walking along the Croton Dam road, at sunset. He remembered having seen a big car, with four men in it, parked beside the highway. He couldn't recall their faces, but one of them had asked for a cigarette, which Wilson had given. The only thing that impressed him at all was the fact that after the stranger had lighted the cigarette, the others in the car had taken turns smoking it.

Sergeant La Forge drew the butt from his pocket and Wilson immediately said it was the kind he smoked. La Forge described the spot beside the road where he had found it. Wilson nodded. That was the place, he said, where the strange car had been parked.

Captain Nagell and Sergeant La Forge kept on patiently with their queries. Try as they would, they couldn't get Wilson to recall the faces of the car's occupants. But they found that he had got an impression of how the car looked from the rear.

He didn't know what make it was, but he thought, however, that he might be able to recognize it if he saw it again.

ON the strength of that, the troopers hurried Wilson off to the barracks. All the cars there were shown to Wilson, and others were brought in from surrounding garages. Each was backed toward him, and he was asked to watch. Suddenly he spoke. "That's it. I remember now. I'm sure of it!"

The car he pointed at was an old-type Marmon.

The troopers began another wide-spread search. The owner of every Marmon in the region was run to earth. Questions were asked. Answers were recorded. A policeman in Ossining remembered suddenly that he had seen a Marmon parked in the backyard of a house on Williams Street. Sergeant La Forge hurried there at once.

The car was gone, but La Forge got a good imprint of its tire tracks, and they checked up perfectly with the plaster-cast of those others taken outside the Ryder farmstead.

He knew he was getting closer to the end of the chase. He hurried up the steps of the house, gun drawn, expecting trouble. But there was only a woman there. She owned the house. She said four young lodgers named Robertson, Johnson, Koval and Jackson, had left suddenly for Florida. They seemed nervous about something, she said, and anxious to get away. She couldn't understand it.

La Forge could, however. He and Captain Nagell got detailed descriptions of the four men from the woman. He wired police heads in many parts of Florida, asking that the quartette be apprehended. A week passed—and he got the expected message.

The criminals had been captured by the sheriff of Hillsborough County, Florida. They were sent back North, indicted for the killing of Ryder, tried and convicted. The cigarette, borrowed from Wilson, had formed the clue that had caused their capture. And all of them were shipped back again to the grim walls of Sing Sing.

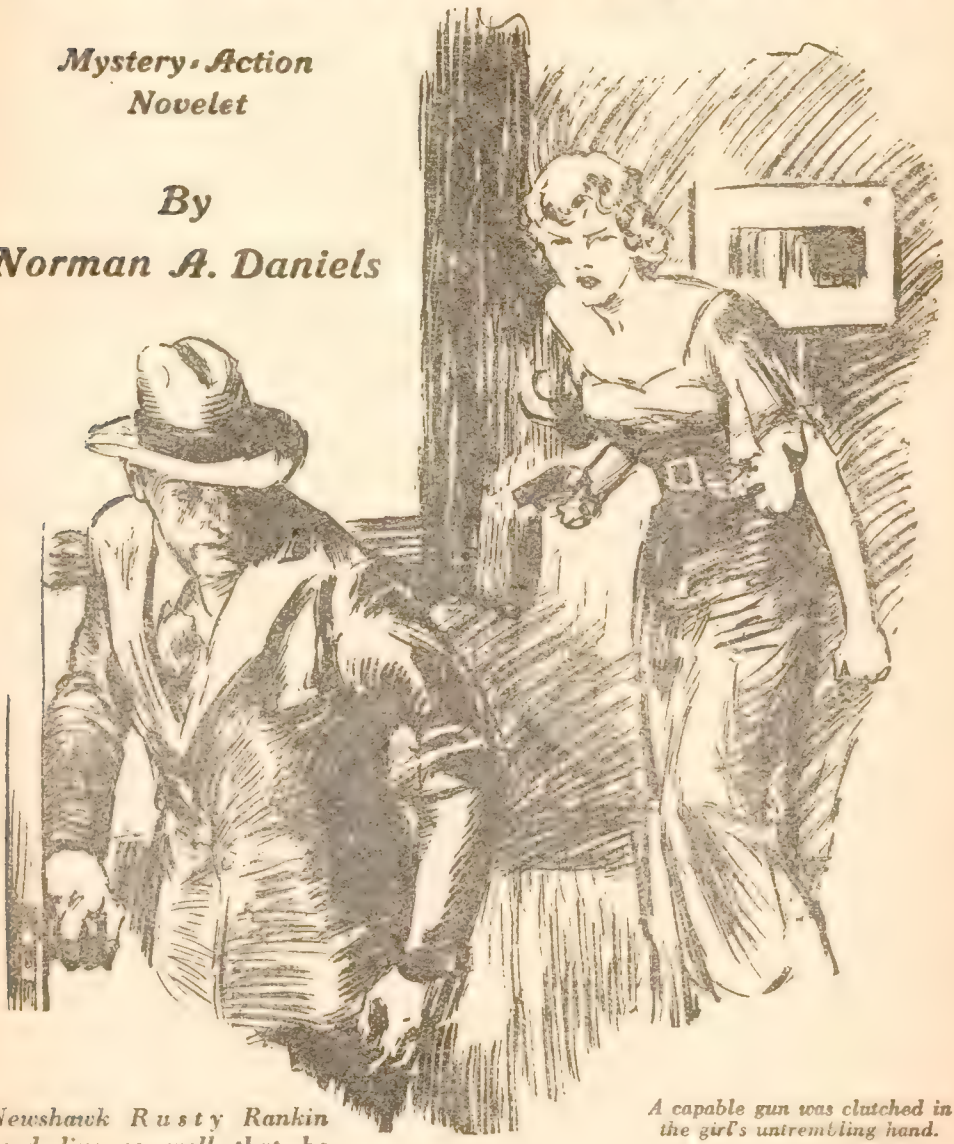
Carelessness, in telling their destination to the landlady, and in stopping on the road to bum a cigarette, proved to be the murderers' undoing.

# The Ghost Reporter

*Mystery-Action Novelet*

*By*

*Norman A. Daniels*



*A capable gun was clutched in the girl's untrembling hand.*

*Newshawk Rusty Rankin read lips so well that he talked himself straight into a double murder charge. And then with beautiful women luring him into one gun trap after another, he knew he must again become a bullet target—if he were ever to discover the true colors of the fascinating girl whom he knew as Rita.*

"THERE they are!" Jack Sherman gripped the arm of his companion, and with his eyes, indicated the trio seated at a table about a dozen yards away, across the narrow expanse of the restaurant's dance floor.

"Okay!" Rusty Rankin lifted his menu, and while apparently studying it, surveyed the three people. Two of them

were men, one obviously French—from his quick, excited movements and the phrases that fell from his lips. The other man was an American, sallow-faced, with thin, expressionless features. The third member of the dinner party was a woman. Rusty looked twice at her, and when she glanced up and their eyes met, Rusty ran a finger around his collar.

She was dark, exotic-looking. She smoked from a long ebony holder with graceful, almost sinister movements of her arm.

"Well," Jack Sherman queried in a low voice. "Go on and read their lips! Don't be giving that dame the once over. She's poison, Rusty. She and a quart of arsenic are pals. This is big. Don't let them know you're watching, or they'll have your throat slit in ten minutes."

Rusty centered his attention on the lips of the trio. Deafened for two years by a premature explosion at an army base, Rusty had learned to read lips and understand the words they formed equally as fast as though he could hear. Cured of his affliction, Rusty found this new art to advantage in his work of a reporter. There were many puzzled frowns on the faces of the socially elect when they read in Rusty's paper almost detailed transcripts of conversations they had had with friends.

"The woman—she's Russian, Jack—is laughing and trying to make the sour-pan American like vodka. He hates the stuff."

"To the devil with that," Jack said tensely. "Watch 'em. Pretty soon they'll begin to talk about Europe and ship movements. That dame goes abroad about six times a year, and every time she does, those guys profit about a quarter of a million bucks. This is the biggest thing anybody ever stumbled on."

"Keep going!" Rusty said. "I can hear you and watch them at the same time."

Jack laughed. "Tell you? Listen, squirt, I wouldn't trust anybody with this yarn, especially you. We haven't been exactly friends this past year, and if I could have found anybody else to read lips as good as you, I'd have got him. I had you stuck on the society page because you interfered with me once before, but if you help me with this job, I'd forget all about that and get you reassigned to a good beat. After all, we reporters have to stick together."

"Yeah," Rusty grunted. "We stick when we got a good story, and need me to solve it. Okay, Jack, I know you're about the best crime reporter in the city, and you have a reputation to keep up. I'll help. Wait—shut up a second! The woman is talking about sailing at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon for Rotterdam. Sour-puss says that's all right because the job will be pulled off just before three. Say, you've got to give me some idea of what this is all about. Who are these people?"

"The woman is an honest-to-goodness countess. Her name's Valerie Ivanovna. The guy with the trick whiskers is a frog eater named Henri La Flamme, and old push-in-the-face with them is Nick Loring—yeah, the broker. That's as much as you're going to know. If you get curious, read the next edition, which is due to make everybody in New York sit up and take notice. I'll keep 'em on their toes until the three-o'clock edition goes off the presses tomorrow afternoon. Then—the biggest, cleanest scoop any newshawk ever made in the history of newspapers. So long, Rusty! I gotta scram."

JACK arose, walked quickly toward the exit and disappeared. Rusty shrugged and plunged into his dinner. He glanced toward the trio he had been watching, and saw that a fourth member had joined the group. He was a burly, squint-eyed individual, who bent low and listened to softly-spoken words from Loring, the American. Rusty made out only the last of the conversation.

"No matter where he goes, I think he and that redhead over there were watching, and Sherman left suddenly. If he knows anything—silence him."

The man straightened up and Rusty had a bare glimpse of a gun butt protruding from a shoulder holster. He swallowed half a buscuit in one gulp, then dropped his gaze to his plate.

Something big was up, all right—big enough to warrant the murder of a prominent reporter, if he knew too much. Rusty realized he had to contact Jack Sherman at once, but he dared not arouse suspicion by leaving hastily. He ate the rest of his dinner, without tasting it, called for his check and strolled to the cloak room, where he secured his hat. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an individual, patterned closely after the man to whom Loring had given his orders—idly gazing at him. When Rusty walked out, this man fell in behind him.

"Damn Sherman, anyhow," Rusty said between his teeth. "He's flirting with a slug in the back, and he's put me in the same spot. Why can't he tell me what this is all about?"

Rusty stepped into a drug store, but was aware that his shadow followed blithely and entered a phone booth next to the one he was in the act of using.

Rusty cursed. If he phoned Sherman at the office, this listener would overhear —and then the shooting would begin. He hurried out of the drug store, darted down a subway entrance and grabbed an express. He heaved a sigh of relief, which was short lived; for on the platform of the same car he occupied, was the shadower, as unflustered as though this were an every-day occurence.

Rusty got out at the next station, went to the street and grabbed a taxi. He gave orders to be driven north, and as his cab shot away from the curb, he saw the burly man hail another and step in before it came to a stop.

Rusty rubbed his chin. He knew more than one way to fool a trailer.

"Pull up quick beside that elevated stairway," he ordered his driver. "Here's a buck. Never mind the change."

The cab came to a jolting halt, and Rusty grinned when he saw the taxi of his pursuer race by. Rusty leaped from the cab, ran up the stairs to the elevated platform and astounded waiting passengers by jumping to the tracks, running across them and pulling himself up on the opposite platform. A train bore down on him, but he was safe even before the motorman had time to jam on his brakes.

Across the tracks, on the opposite platform, Rusty saw his disgruntled pursuer. He grinned and blew him a kiss before he stepped into the train. He rode uptown for half a dozen blocks and finally took a subway to the financial district.

He made certain his trail hadn't been picked up before he phoned the newspaper office.

"Sherman filed a yarn and went to his apartment," the city editor told Rusty. "What's he got up his sleeve, do you know? It's something due to break tomorrow, and he printed a notice that he'll solve a crime before the police even arrive."

"He's crazy," Rusty said. "I don't know what it's all about, but I'm going to see him. Before I finish I'll find out. See you later."

He hung up, taxied to the street where Sherman maintained bachelor apartments and approached the building afoot. He saw no signs of lurking figures, and went into the lobby. A grinning elevator boy recognized him.

"You gonna see Mr. Sherman again, sir? Boy, I remembers the day you popped him on the eye. Better be careful. He came in ten or fifteen minutes ago—and he had an edge on. He was ugly, too. Said he could lick any half dozen rats."

"Thanks," Rusty grinned. "Maybe I'll pop him again, if he is unreasonable. By the way—see if you can keep everybody away from him, will you? If he has visitors, take 'em to the wrong floor and telephone Sherman's apartment as quickly as you can."

"Okay, boss." The boy accepted the folded bill Rusty slipped him. He stopped the elevator, and Rusty walked swiftly down the long, dark corridor toward Sherman's door. He tapped on it, stood waiting.

"Whaddya want?" Sherman's voice, thick and aggressive came from the apartment.

"It's me—Rusty. I got some more dirt on those three. Let me in, Jack."

"Okay—but I got a gun in my fist, and

if you ain't Rusty, it's gonna explode damned fast. Come in with your mitts up."

THE door opened. Sherman, swaying slightly, was framed in it. He gripped a gun, which was centered on Rusty's chest. Sherman squinted at him, lowered the weapon.

"Come on in, sap," he grated. "Whaddya wanta do, flirt with a casket? There's guys lookin' for me, Rusty."

"Yeah—and me, too," Rusty said dryly. Better lock that door. Listen, Jack, I'm in on this yarn, whatever it is. Suppose those men stop you. I heard Loring give orders that if you knew anything, you were to be silenced—and he said that to a guy who packed a rod. If you get rubbed out, where's your story? Somebody has to print it. Give me the lowdown, and I promise to keep quiet—unless you land in the hospital."

"Or on a morgue slab, huh?" Jack grunted. "Nothin' doin', Rusty. I don't like you. I never have, and I never will; so if I was gonna spill what I know to anybody, it wouldn't be you. I'll tell you this much, because it'll make your ears burn. Tomorrow afternoon there's gonna be a big job pulled. The cops are gonna get word of it at three o'clock. They'll arrive at the scene of the crime about three minutes past three and five minutes past three my story will be on the streets, giving the names of the guys mixed up in the mess. Even before the cops get the names of witnesses, everybody'll be reading my story about who did the job. Is that a scoop?"

"What kind of a job are they going to pull off?" Rusty asked quietly. "Is it a kill?"

Sherman shrugged. "Might be. Those babies don't take no for an answer. They'll start shooting if anybody gets fresh."

"Then you've got to prevent that crime." Rusty grabbed Sherman by the coat and shook him a little. "Listen, you drunken, egotistical fool, you can save human lives and get just as much glory! This is something for the cops. Where's your phone?"

"Oh, no you don't!" Sherman dragged his gun into sight. "Reach for the phone, and I'll wing you, Rusty. I swear I will. I'm handling this case in my own way. You can keep out—see?"

Rusty said nothing. He moved back a pace. His fingers curled into hard fists.

"You're gonna stay right here," Sherman growled. "I'm takin' no chances. I was gonna give you a by-line on part of this story, but now you get nothin'."

Rusty turned sideways, and out of the corner of his eye, saw Sherman lower the gun. Like a flash Rusty charged. He darted beneath the gun, grabbed the wrist of the hand which held it and turned hard. The gun clattered to the floor and he kicked it under the bed.

"You're crazy," Rusty said between gasps as he clung to Sherman. "For the sake of a lousy story you'll allow people to be killed. You're the one who ought to take the rap if anything happens. I'm going to phone the cops."

Suddenly Sherman tore himself free. He darted for the telephone, grabbed the instrument, and with a yank, pulled it loose from the connections. He cursed luridly and flung the phone at Rusty. It hit the reporter a glancing blow that knocked him off his feet. With a wild bellow, Sherman charged. Rusty lifted both feet, kicked out and sent Sherman crashing against the wall. He arose, wiped blood from his eyes and met Sherman's next wild rush with two husky punches that connected. Sherman went down again and lay still.

"Damned half-wit," Rusty grunted. "Now for the cops. I'll make Sherman talk."

He turned the key in the lock, opened the door and met a murderous blow swinging down at his skull. Unprepared, Rusty took the blow almost full on the crown of his head. Instinct caused him to attempt to duck, but the weapon crashed down.

He saw set, cruel faces whirl in a maelstrom of terror. His knees buckled and he slipped to the floor. He wasn't completely unconscious, but his limbs refused to obey any impulses sent from his brain. He lay very still. Some one bent

over him a moment and grunted in satisfaction. Then he was alone, sprawled in the hallway.

THERE was a supply-room just opposite, its door open a crack. Rusty, through slitted eyes, saw it—and a hope of escape. Despite his spinning senses, he was able to pull himself softly across the floor, push the door open and creep inside. He closed the door, and by exerting all his strength, sat up long enough to turn the bolt.

He was none too soon. Harsh voices came from the hallway, as men hurried toward the elevator and the stairs. Half a minute later, some one came back down the hall. There was a gasp and a sartled scream. Rusty groaned. He knew what had happened, without even seeing the results of that murderous visit. Sherman was probably stone dead—and locked in his brain was the complete secret of a crime planned for only a few hours to come . . . .

Rusty reached for the bolt to open the door and release himself. He paused. Heavy footsteps and gruff voices sounded. If he walked out now, he'd be held. Somewhere outside this building the murderers would lurk, waiting for him to appear. There would be a fusilade of bullets, and a society reporter would go down riddled with lead.

"Not that way," Rusty grunted. "I'll get to headquarters and spill my story to a big shot who won't stop to ask me a million questions. It's the fire escape for me."

There was one leading from the window of that supply-room. Rusty staggered toward it. He was dizzy and weak, but his jaw was thrust out pugnaciously. He opened the window, slipped out and climbed down.

Sirens were whirring madly as he hit the concrete platform behind the apartment building. Things were going to be mighty hot in this neighborhood. Rusty grinned a little, patted the lump on his head and began to trot lightly toward a fence. He vaulted it, came out in an alley and emerged on the street running parallel to the one now alive with police.

He hailed a taxi.

"Police headquarters, brother, and don't spare the cylinders. If you get a ticket, I'll square it."

The cab shot away from the curb, raced through a red light and headed down town toward Centre Street. It came to a jarring halt in front of police headquarters, Rusty climbed out, paid off the driver; and, as he turned around, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"If it ain't the *Sphere's* society reporter come down nice and quiet-like to give himself up." Sergeant Donovan's voice changed to a snarl. "Well it won't do you much good. A guy who murders his pal oughta go to the chair."

Rusty stared while his jaw sagged a little. "W-what's this all about?" he asked, bewildered.

Sergeant Donovan laughed. "As if you didn't know! You're pinched; that's what it's all about. Pinched for bumping off Jack Sherman—and we got you cold. You were seen going to his apartment. We know you hated the guy; you had a fight with him a few months ago. Hell, Sherman even pulled the phone outta the wall, trying to call for help before you smeared him. Let's go inside, killer. Wait a minute! What's that in your pocket?"

Rusty could only stare as Donovan pulled a long, slender knife from his inner pocket. Suddenly Rusty remembered how one of the men had bent over him for a moment. The knife had been planted on him.

"Listen, Sarge," Rusty began. "You gotta listen. There's more to this than you think. I didn't bump Sherman. There're other guys mixed up in it and—"

"Shut up and stick out your paws while I kiss 'em with bracelets," Donovan growled. "Come on—before I clout you one and drag you inside."

Rusty thought swiftly. It would be better to obey. Once inside headquarters, he might persuade the police commissioner himself to listen to his story. He shrugged and extended his hands.

A sedan was racing down the street, its motor roaring as the driver stepped

on the gas. The light from a street lamp glinted on polished steel protruding from within the tonneau. Rusty saw it just in time. He spun around, butted Sergeant Donovan in the middle and knocked him flat. At the same instant he flung himself toward a cellarway.

LEAD spattered the sidewalk. To his horror Rusty saw Sergeant Donovan's body twitch as bullets found their mark. The detective tried to draw his gun, but his hand froze halfway toward the holster, then sank limply to the pavement.

Rusty saw policemen pour out of headquarters. He climbed from his temporary trench. They were helping Donovan sit up. He was not dead then, but a stream of blood ran down over his face. The wounded detective, directly beneath the street lamp, began to talk. Rusty read his lips.

"That rat, Rusty Rankin—" Donovan managed between gasps of pain—"I nailed him—but—he had—pals. Get the —rat!"

Rusty whirled about and raced down the street. Somebody shouted a command to halt. Guns cracked. Lead howled dangerously close. Rusty went on. Sweat poured down his face and his senses spun as he realized what all this meant. Now, more than ever, he was a hunted man, a suspected cop killer, whose pals had rescued him at the very entrance to police headquarters.

He darted into an alley, located an open cellar door and went down it. He merged with the darkness of a far corner, where he squatted while he listened to the sounds of pursuit outside.

For an hour he stayed there, resting and trying to figure a way out. It would take concrete evidence to prove his innocence. Silently he cursed Sherman's dogged determination to spill a scoop that would startle the nation.

"I don't even know what it's all about," Rusty thought to himself. "All I know is that three people caused all this; that Russian woman, the Frenchman, and Nick Loring, the broker. Loring gave the order to trail Sherman. He's responsible for his murder. Loring has got to talk—and I'm going to make him."

It was ten-thirty when Rusty cautiously emerged from the cellar. He turned up his collar, pulled down the snap brim of his hat and kept toward the shadows as much as possible while he walked down the street. He dared not hurry, nor did he risk using a cab. By this time all taxi drivers would have his description.

A green coupé pulled to the curb half a block ahead of him, and Rusty's heart missed a beat. It was a radio car. Grimly he determined to walk by it, trusting that in the darkness his features were concealed well enough to get past.

The radio squealed as he went past the car. The announcer's voice, flat and smug, reached him.

"Calling all cars. All cars. Rusty Rankin still at large. Look for man about thirty wearing a blue suit smeared with blood. He is six-feet-one, a hundred and eighty pounds, has blue eyes and bright red hair. Use caution in apprehending this man. He is dangerous. Shoot to kill if he resists."

Rusty hardly breathed as he went by the car, but the two patrolmen inside were busy writing down the description as it came over the air. They didn't notice the slightly stooped figure of a six-foot-one man trying to make himself several inches shorter.

Rusty went into a crowded drug store, looked up the address of Nick Loring in the phone book and headed in that direction. Twice he had to turn calmly into apartment-house entrances as the blue uniform of the law hove into sight.

Loring's residence proved to be a huge mansion in an exclusive section. It lay well back from the road, along which shrubbery and well-placed trees effectively concealed the house from view of passers-by.

Rusty dared not chance a detailed reconnoiter. There might be detectives or gunmen about, and Rusty had plenty to fear from either group. He grimaced at the thought. He was a lone wolf, whose safety depended on the wisdom and speed of his moves.

He saw a huge limousine turn into the driveway, and for the first time, he heard the faint strains of an expensive string orchestra in the house. Loring was throwing a party of some kind. Rusty silently declared himself a guest, wanted or not, as he wriggled through a big hedge to enter the estate.

Slowly he made his way toward the house, grateful for the protection offered him by the combined elements of a pitch-dark night and plenty of shrubbery. He crouched behind a low bush. To enter by the front door was out of the question. The back door was equally as dangerous a place to show himself. There remained only the windows.

A big porch wound halfway around the house. Steel trellises supported thick vines that clambered upward to cover the wall and part of the roof. Here lay the only opportunity to enter unchallenged.

Rusty crawled across the intervening, cleared space, pulled himself up on the porch railing and took a quick look around. He was unobserved. He reached up, grasped the steel lattice-work of the trellis and began to climb. Well-trained muscles and a savage determination to see this thing through to any end, bitter or sweet, lent speed to his endeavors. He was just below a window of a darkened room. The window itself was partially raised. Rusty opened it wide, using caution, so as not to create any noise.

He slipped into the room, stood for a moment regaining his breath and equilibrium. Below, the sounds of revelry were loud enough to drown out the tread of his feet as he walked across the floor. A stream of light came from beneath the door toward which he was headed.

Suddenly there was a click and the room filled with light that temporarily blinded him. A voice, curt, yet mellow, snapped a command:

"Stop where you are! Turn around and raise your hands above your head!"

SLOWLY, and with sinking heart, Rusty obeyed. A girl was standing just across the room. A thoroughly capable gun was clutched in a hand which did not tremble in the least.

For a moment she looked at him closely. Then recognition swept over her with a wave of horror.

"You're—you're the murderer the police—broadcast about!"

"Take a good look at me," Rusty said earnestly. "Do I look like a killer?"

"Well—" she hesitated, her blue eyes intent on his face—"no—but you must be. The police say you are dangerous. I'm going to call dad."

"Wait a minute," Rusty snapped. "Does your father own this house?"

"Of course he does. Why?"

Rusty emitted a long sigh of resignation. "All right. It won't make much difference, I guess. Only I'll never be arrested. I'm not lucky enough for that. The cops might listen to my story, but—but—"

Rusty hesitated. This lovely girl couldn't be implicated with this mob of killers. No matter if her father were Nick Loring, she couldn't possibly know of his crooked connections.

"Exactly what do you mean?" she asked him.

"I didn't kill Jack Sherman. Oh, I know they'll tell you—newspapers, police and all—that Sherman and I were enemies. Well, we were. He was going to risk human lives to satisfy his lust to get a scoop over the wires and increase his own fame. I tried to stop him. We had a fight, in which I knocked him down. Then somebody slugged me—look at the bump on my head, if you don't believe me. The men who did that, killed Sherman to silence him and frame me."

"But the police say your friends even shot down a detective, who was in the act of arresting you," she countered. Her gun never wavered. Rusty kept his hands up.

"Friends of mine?" Rusty laughed hoarsely. "Those bullets were intended to wipe me out. Sergeant Donovan got in the way of a few, that's all. I gave him a shove to get him out of range and beat it for shelter myself."

"But if the person who murdered Sherman also wants to kill you, what is

the reason for it? What did you know about them? I'm asking you these things because—well, I know you, Rusty Rankin. I've seen you at more than one social affair—and—and you don't look like a criminal to me. But I warn you, don't lower your hands or try to get away."

"They killed Sherman to keep his tongue quiet," Rusty explained, "to keep him from writing a story tomorrow. They want to kill me because they think I'm wise to them. They plan some kind of a stupendous crime tomorrow afternoon. There is a Russian woman mixed up in it, a Frenchman and—and—" he hesitated—"an American."

The girl frowned and wrinkled her pert nose. Rusty became aware of one overwhelming sensation: he was in the presence of one of the loveliest girls he had ever seen; with every second she grew even more beautiful. But her father was a member of a band of murderers.

"That sounds almost like Henri La Flamme and Countess Valerie Ivanovna," she said slowly. "They are here—in this house—as my father's guests."

"Countess Ivanovna is one of them. If La Flamme is a short, pudgy guy with a fancy goatee, he's another."

Slowly the girl lowered her gun. "That description fits La Flamme," she said. "But how are you sure they are criminals? I have known them for months. And who is the third member?"

"I know they're crooks because—well, I can read lips. I watched them talking early this evening. I know what they talked about. I told Sherman, and like a fool, he printed the gist of that conversation. The moment they read it, they'll know what has happened. Would you mind if I lowered my arms. They're going to sleep from lack of circulation."

"Of course not," she said. "I believe you, Rusty Rankin. I'm face to face with a man the police are sure is a murderer, but I can't make myself believe you are that man. You haven't told me the third member of the trio. He, or she, might also be in the house."

"He's here," Rusty said and went on, lying gallantly, "but I didn't recognize him in the restaurant. We can do but one thing, Miss—Miss—"

"My name is—Rita," she said, smiling. "What can we do? I came up here because I had a headache. Then you came through the window. I confess you nearly frightened me to death."

Rusty grinned. "The way you held that gat didn't look as though you were scared. Say, you're pretty swell to help me like this. For all you know, I might have killed Sherman."

"No you didn't," she said softly. "Some day I'll tell you why I know that. But now you must get out of here, do something to absolve yourself."

"If I could only convince the police." Rusty sat down, straddling a chair and resting his chin against the back of it. "But I can't even tell them what that gang has up its sleeve, because I don't know. Something is going to happen tomorrow—about three o'clock in the afternoon. Whatever it is, there is a definite connection between that hour and the sailing of the countess for Europe. If that's all I can tell the police, they'll laugh at me and indict me for murder."

"But it's the only way," Rita said tensely. "If you are seen, anywhere, you'll be killed. I—I could hide you here—in my room."

Rusty smiled broadly. "Thanks for all that faith," he said. "But while I lie low here, the gang will carry out its plans. No—I've got to chance the police, or try to handle it myself. If the cops refuse to believe me—then what?"

"Rusty," she said earnestly, "you must do whatever there is to be done—alone. Some people would call me a fool for letting you convince me of your innocence, but you have—and I don't care what anyone says. Dad would do the same thing. Perhaps we ought to take him into our confidence."

"No!" Rusty leaped to his feet. "Don't do that. Please! It would only make him a target for those fiends—and you, too. He must know nothing of this. Promise me that?"

"I promise," she said. "But I think you are wrong. Dad would know how to handle this. He could even see that the po-

lice listened to your story, Rusty. But if you insist—of course, I won't tell him. I have to go downstairs, now. They will come looking for me if I don't. I'll try to slip away very soon. You won't—lose faith in me?"

"Never!" Rusty said, and he felt like taking her into his arms. "I'll stay right here and cook up some way of finding out what this mob is up to."

She hesitated at the door, as though she desired or expected something. Rusty started toward her and stopped five feet away. She smiled, opened the door and vanished, but only for a second. She stuck her head in again.

"I came back to tell you that the countess and Monsieur La Flamme have rooms in this wing of the house. They are three doors to the left of this one, Rusty. There might be something—"

"Thanks," Rusty said. "I'll have a look-see."

HE gave her five minutes before he risked opening the door and slipping into the hallway. Only the noise of the party below could be heard. The second floor was apparently deserted.

"If only her father wasn't mixed up in this," Rusty said to himself, "I'd grab him or that frog eater and hammer the truth out of him. Maybe they've got something on Loring to make him do this against his will."

Rusty opened the door to the Frenchman's room. He slipped in, snapped on the lights and began a search. First, he went through the crook's bags, but found nothing that might indicate La Flamme was a thief and murderer. He opened a closet and searched the two suits of clothing hanging within. Rusty was just turning as he closed the door, when he looked into the muzzle of a revolver for the second time.

This time Nick Loring held the gun. A smirk of satisfaction crossed his face as he recognized Rusty.

"Don't move!" he snapped. "I know I'm dealing with a murderer, so I'll shoot if you take one step toward me. Walk to this door! Go downstairs where I can get help. I'm going to send for the police and put you in the electric chair where you belong."

"Can't we talk this over, Mr. Loring?" Rusty begged.

"Talk over what? You're a murderer, practically convicted even before your trial. March ahead of me and don't let your arms down an inch."

Rusty shrugged and obeyed. The music stopped abruptly when he stepped into the big ballroom. He was instantly recognized, thanks to the careful broadcasts of the police. Murmurs of horror went up from the matrons and debutantes. Near the orchestra platform, Rita disengaged herself from the arms of Henri La Flamme. She stared at Rusty with wide eyes, while one hand went to her throat in a little despairing gesture.

She had betrayed him! Rusty felt certain of that, as he saw in her little act, only pretense.

Loring handed his gun to an elderly man with white hair, and eyes that showed they could twinkle in high humor.

"Watch him, Ralph, while I phone the police. Don't forget that he is a murderer. If he makes a move, shoot him. He'd do the same to you, if that gun were in his hand."

"I'll take care of him, Nick," the man agreed. He looked at Rusty quizzically. "You look to me, young man, as though you ought to be given a good spanking. I'll say this much for you: I certainly can't see any outward marks of a criminal on you. But appearances can lie."

Rusty said nothing. There was a bitterness in his heart for this girl who had betrayed him so completely. Of course, she had sent her father to La Flamme's room for the express purpose of capturing him and turning him over to the police. The gang felt so certain of itself that they were willing to risk the publicity of the wild yarn Rusty was bound to tell.

Loring returned. "The police will arrive shortly. While we're waiting, we'll remain as we are. This man is desperate. We mustn't give him a chance of escape. I'll take the gun now, Ralph."

Rusty said nothing. He kept his arms high, but his spirits were lower than the soles of his shoes. He had built up hope on the faith this girl had in him. With one sly gesture she had ruined everything. He mentally cursed himself for being such a fool as to have believed she would have faith in him from the first moment she had found him in her room.

A heavy car roared to a halt in the driveway outside. Four men barged in. Their manners and gestures indicated them as detectives.

One of them, a stranger to Rusty, stepped close and clamped cuffs on his unresisting wrists.

"So we got the old killer himself. Good work, Mr. Loring. Too bad this didn't happen a couple of days from now. There'd have been a juicy reward on this bird's neck by that time. You might have been able to get cigars for a year out of it."

"Never mind that," Loring commanded brusquely. "Take this man away. He is too dangerous to be in this house with law abiding people. Don't let him escape."

"If he tries," the detective grinned, "I'll fill him so full of lead he won't be able to raise one foot off the ground. Well, thanks for nabbing him. You'll read all about how he walks to the chair, in a couple of months. Come on, you rat."

Rusty was jerked roughly toward the door. Halfway toward it, Rita suddenly darted from the crowd and sped to his side. She put both arms around him, intoxicating Rusty by the perfume from the copious silk handkerchief she held in her hand. Her lips rose to his. Impulsively, before he knew what he was doing, he kissed her. For a bare instant her cheek was against his.

The detective pulled Rusty away. He turned for a last look at her as he was yanked through the door. She was trying to tell him something. Her lips formed words. Rusty read their portent with a shudder of horror.

"Not—police!"

Those two words had formed on her pretty lips. Rusty looked at the four men who guarded him. Two needed shaves badly. All wore low cut, pointed shoes. Their clothing was of an expensive weave.

Rusty swallowed hard. These men were not police. They were members of Loring's gang, summoned by him. Then, why had Rita tried to save him? If she had deliberately sent her father to effect that capture, why should she now try to let him know this was not an arrest but, very probably, a one-way auto ride? Rusty gave up trying to think of that. There were more pressing items that needed immediate solution.

He was shoved roughly into the back of a sedan. Two men piled in with him, while the other two occupied the front seat. The car started off, turned into the highway and sped for the outskirts.

"Where are you taking me?" Rusty asked slowly. "Headquarters is in the other direction."

"We're taking you on the first lap to hell, wise guy. Make a sound, and I'll sink a slug in your guts where it hurts the most. Now clam up and make out you're enjoying the ride."

RUSTY lapsed into silent hopelessness. He could see no possible way of getting free of these men. They were all armed, and he didn't have so much as a pocket-knife. His wrists were cuffed, and his guards were attentive.

The car was leaving the city proper. In five or six short miles they would reach deserted portions of the highway, where a murder could be accomplished with no one the wiser until a crumpled, bleeding thing that had been a man would be found in the gutter, or deep in some corn field.

Only the memory of that kiss which Rita had so strangely given him was the little satisfaction Rusty felt was left to his life. Why had she kissed him as he was going out the door? Why had she warned him? Had she been trying to say more when Rusty was yanked out of the house?

He sighed and stirred a little in his seat. The man on his right slapped him smartly across the mouth and grinned delightedly. Rusty maintained a stony si-

lence, but had these men been observant, they might have noticed a new glint in the reporter's eyes.

For when he tried to duck that cowardly blow, he felt something thrust deep in his coat pocket. Without an examination he knew it was a gun—put there by Rita while she pretended to kiss him affectionately . . . .

"What's going to happen to me?" Rusty asked suddenly.

The burly man who led the gang, laughed. "You gonna stop a slug, brother. But don't worry, we know how to bump guys without hurtin' 'em—much."

"Why pick on me?" Rusty asked. "I don't even know you men. Why, all you'd have to do is dump me somewhere near a cop—and he'd do the job for you."

"Maybe," the leader agreed. "But sometimes one bullet don't kill quick. What we gotta be sure of is that your tongue don't wag, get me? You know too much."

"About the job you have planned for three o'clock tomorrow afternoon?"

The men in the car jumped in alarm. "How'd you find that out?" the leader demanded.

"If I tell, will you take these cuffs off my wrists and let me smoke a cigarette?"

"It's a deal. Hell, you couldn't get away, anyhow, and you were frisked before we dragged you out. Let's have it. Who spilled that dirt?"

"Loring," Rusty said casually. "He told me a lot of things when he stuck me up. He's a rather boastful sort, isn't he? He went right into detail about the job."

"Why, the double-crossing rat. Somebody might have heard him. What else, buddy? Talk up!"

"Sure," Rusty said, "after the cuffs are off and I get my smoke."

The leader inserted a key in the cuffs and removed them. He handed Rusty a pack of cigarettes and a packet of matches.

"The funny thing about it is that you men are going to do all the dirty work, and if anything happens—you take it on the chin."

As he talked, Rusty stuck a cigarette between his lips, scratched a match and lit it. But while he maneuvered this, his other hand dropped into his coat pocket and curled about the butt of a small automatic.

"That's the way that high-class mob works," Rusty went on, trying to get the crooks engrossed in studying his theories. "You do the dangerous part, while they take the cream. Am I right?"

"Not this time," the leader grunted. "It's a fifty-fifty proposition. Soon as we lay hands on them bonds, they slip us the cash and we forget all about them. That way, we make more than if we fenced 'em for twenty cents on the dollar."

Rusty slid the gun out of his pocket, slipped off the safety and suddenly went into action. He drove a short but powerful blow to the jaw of the crook on his right. His fist, clasping the gun, drove part of the weapon into the punch.

The crook's head snapped back and his eyes glazed. The leader of the men reached for his armpit. Rusty jabbed him in the stomach with his automatic.

"Stretch 'em," he grated. "And tell those two tramps in the front seat to stay very quiet, before I put lead in the back of their dirty necks. Driver, stop this bus—and stop it fast."

THE man beside the driver turned suddenly and whipped out a gun. Rusty fired without aiming. A tiny spot appeared between the killer's eyes. He lurched back, hit the windshield and slumped toward the floorboards. The leader of the men made a motion toward his own weapon, but stopped quickly when he stared into the business end of Rusty's gun.

The car slowed, stopped. The driver promptly elevated his hands.

"All right," Rusty told the three crooks, "get out! You can put your dead pal in the back seat. I'm borrowing this bus, and I'm heading back to the city. I'd like to take you three men with me, but it's too dangerous; so I'm going alone. The police can pick up mugs like you anytime."

"You gonna drive the car back?" the leader asked, and there was almost a grimace on his face.

"And you guys will walk," Rusty said. "Come on—get out, before I help you with lead."

They clambered out hurriedly. The driver fumbled for a moment near the body of the crook Rusty had shot. Then he got out also, and the three crooks lined the quiet roadside, their hands aloft. On terse orders from Rusty, they transfered the body of the dead crook to the tonneau.

Rusty got out, slid behind the wheel and stepped on the starter. He watched the men closely as he began to back around, keeping them in full view in the powerful headlights. The leader's lips moved a little, but Rusty could not make out his words. The driver replied, and this time Rusty was able to read the thick lips of this lesser crook.

"Five minutes, boss—that's all."

The driver said nothing else. Rusty turned and stepped hard on the gas. Five minutes. What did the driver mean by that? What could five short minutes have to do with their predicament, almost ten miles from town, and along a practically deserted roadway, at this hour of the morning?

There was an electric clock set in the dashboard of the car. As he drove, Rusty glanced at it. Two minutes had elapsed since he left the three gunmen stranded. The hands of the clock moved slowly on. Rusty centered his attention on his driving. Now he had evidence enough to circumvent the crime that Loring and his cohorts planned. But where did they plan to carry out the job they had in hand? Was it a bank? . . . No! Mention had been made of bonds. A juicy haul at some broker's office would result in plenty of profit.

On inspiration, Rusty stopped the car, got out, opened the back door and searched the dead crook. There was nothing to give him a clue. He started for the driver's seat again.

The clock lacked about twenty seconds of the five minutes mentioned by the driver. Rusty peered at the face of the clock. There was a thin, almost invisible wire stretched across it. He looked no more. Like a hare, he whirled and raced madly across the road. He was none too soon.

With a terrific roar the car was blown to bits. The force of the explosion knocked Rusty off his feet, throwing him forcibly into the soft shoulder of the highway. Debris fell against him, but he was unhurt. Slowly he got up and looked at what had once been a car. Nothing was left but twisted framework. He sat down weakly on the grass and mopped his brow.

"No wonder they didn't put up much of an argument," he thought. "The driver fixed that clock so the minute hand would touch that wire and—blooey. Just a nice way to keep a hot car from getting picked up by the cops, if they had had to lam out."

That the explosion had happened for the best, Rusty knew only too well. Those crooks would now believe him dead—and their secret dead with him. They would get back to town, carry out their scheme, feeling that no one could interfere.

Rusty got up and headed across country in the direction of the glow against the sky, beneath which lay the bright lights of the city. He dared not attempt to thumb a ride from passing trucks, for fear the crooks might learn of his escape from that horrible explosion.

Sirens were screaming in the distance as state troopers rushed to the scene of the blast. Rusty smiled almost happily. He made up his mind, as he trudged along, that he would somehow prevent the crime, arrest the plotters and give Rita Loring's father a chance to escape. That meant he had to handle everything alone. To call in the police would mean the sacrifice of Loring. Rita had given him a chance at life, therefore he would repay the favor by giving her father an opportunity to flee.

HE reached the city just before dawn. A radio car came slowly down the outlying street. Rusty ducked into an alley, where he pressed himself flat against the wall until danger passed by. He tried

to figure out where he might go before daylight. The hotels were closed to him. He knew that an attempt to reach his own rooms would be fatal, and the flop houses were under constant police observation.

He emerged from the alley, his mind made up, and headed across town until he reached a subway station. He picked a newspaper out of a waste can, got aboard a train and held the paper close to his face, to prevent any of the sleepy passengers from recognizing him as a man wanted by the police.

Twenty minutes later he was again skirting the estate of Nick Loring. He found the same steel trellis, up which he again climbed. The window of Rita's room was partly open. He listened a moment, heard soft sobbing from within.

"Rita," he called softly. "Rita."

"Rusty!" She was hardly able to restrain her voice. "It's you! You got away from them."

"I'm coming in," Rusty said. "That is, if you won't mind."

"Hurry—please," she whispered, and helped him through the window. She was still fully dressed in her evening gown, but tears had erased much of the light makeup on her face.

"There is a room on the third floor, an old servant's room, where nobody will ever find you," she said softly, as his arms went about her. "Oh, Rusty, I thought they'd killed you. I knew one of those men who posed as a detective. He worked for a friend of mine until it was learned he was a thief."

"Thanks for the loan of the gat." Rusty grinned down at her. "It cleared the decks for me. I'll accept your invitation for that room. Rita—promise me one thing."

"Of course."

"Don't tell your father I'm alive. As all the others, he will probably believe me dead, and I want that theory to exist. Do that for me, and—I'll see that he isn't harmed."

"But—I don't understand, Rusty?"

"You don't have to. Now lead me to that room. I've walked ten miles in less than three hours, so my dogs are aching like sore teeth. Don't forget what I said about your father."

"I won't. Just follow me, Rusty. I'm so glad you're all right."

"I'm fine. Say, do you know what ship Countess Ivanovna plans to sail on today?"

"She sails on the Ambassador at four o'clock. Do you know, Rusty, I've a feeling that woman was secretly elated when you were taken out of this house tonight."

RUSTY awoke at noon, refreshed and eager to get to work. He studied his surroundings in an effort to determine just how he could get out of this house without being seen. If Nick Loring spotted him, it would be all up. The crooks would hardly dare to carry out their plans although they would do no more than postpone the hour. Rusty sat down on the edge of the bed, thinking.

Countess Ivanovna was due to sail at four o'clock. The holdup, wherever it was to take place, was set for three. A slow grin stole over Rusty's face. The bonds would be stolen, quickly passed to either Loring, or LaFlamme, the French crook, and taken at once to the countess aboard ship. Before the police even started to question witnesses, the loot would be on its way to Europe and rapid disposal in foreign markets.

Rusty recalled that during the past two years, four stickups of banks and brokers' offices had taken place. No clues had been left, and the bonds had been located only after they had been sold. No wonder Jack Sherman had said this was a gigantic plot involving millions of dollars and crooks who wouldn't hesitate to kill.

He straightened his rumpled clothing, washed up in an adjoining bath room and stole into the hall. It was broad daylight and dangerous to move away from the house. Rusty went to the second floor, barely missed bumping into a maid and backed into a bedroom to hide.

He looked about, saw that this must be Loring's room and discovered suits that seemed as though they might fit perfectly. Grinning he changed clothing.

Dressed in a neat brown suit, and with a wide-brimmed hat over his eyes, he looked far different from the bedraggled man sought by police and crooks alike on the evening before.

He transferred his small automatic to a hip pocket, went to the window and peered out. It was a considerable drop, but Rusty felt capable of managing it. He clambered out, hung from the sill and let go. He fell into a soft flower bed, without injuring himself.

Reaching the street, he pulled his hat far down, covering his flaming locks as best he could. While he walked up the street, he came to a decision. It lacked only an hour now of the time set for the holdup. To determine where that would take place, was an impossibility, but—the loot would be taken to the stateroom of the countess. Rusty began to whistle merrily as he turned his steps toward the waterfront.

The great liner was preparing to sail when Rusty walked up the gangplank. He still had a press card, so keeping his finger over the name inscribed on it, he made use of the credential, to locate the countess' stateroom.

He found the door locked. Rusty tapped on it softly.

"Who is it?" The woman's voice was slightly tinged with fear.

"Mr. Loring sent me," Rusty said. "I have new orders. Let me in."

The door swung open and Rusty pushed his way in. The woman's eyes widened in fear. Rusty clamped the palm of his hand over her mouth, just in time to prevent an ear-splitting screech.

"Now be a good girl." He picked her up and dropped her on the bed. "Unless you behave, I'll have to sock you one, and I don't like to hit ladies as a rule—or are you a lady?"

"What do you want?" she cried, when he removed his hand an inch from her mouth.

"Just a quiet little chat while we wait for the bonds to be delivered. After that, you can do your talking to the police."

"Don't be a fool," she said. "The police are looking for you, too. They'll convict you of murder—send you to the electric chair. Listen to me, my flaming-haired one. I like you—very much. You can stay here in my cabin. We shall sell those bonds, take the money—then Paris, Monte Carlo, Rome—"

"Yeah—and hell," Rusty grunted. "I wouldn't stick with you, lady, if I did have to go to the chair for turning down your offer."

The Russian suddenly reached beneath the pillow on her bed. She turned a tiny gun toward Rusty, who grabbed her hand, wrenched the wrist hard and secured the weapon. Without another word, he ripped a sheet from the bed, tore it into strips and gagged and tied her efficiently. Then he placed her on the floor and rolled her under the bunk.

A small boudoir clock showed that the holdup had been accomplished by this time, and the loot already on its way to this ship. Rusty sat down, appropriated one of Countess Ivanovna's long cigarettes and puffed contently on it.

TEN minutes passed and then came a brisk rap on the door. Rusty turned the key, opened the door, and when Henri LaFlamme, carrying a suitcase, bustled into the room, Rusty grabbed him from behind. He tore the suitcase free, dropped it to the floor and threw the struggling Frenchman to the bed. He had more strips of cloth ready, and he fell to work at once.

LaFlamme, sputtering and cursing, jabbed one free arm toward Rusty's face, and connected. Rusty, without a word, clipped his prisoner a stiff punch squarely on the eye.

"That'll trade-mark you, runt," he grinned. "Try any more funny stuff, and I'll decorate your other peeper. You are going to stay here and keep your female pal company—until the cops show up."

He completed his job deftly, tested the bonds to be sure the man couldn't get away, and pulled the gag a little tighter. He opened a closet door, dropped his prisoner inside and closed it.

With the suitcase under his arm Rusty locked the cabin door, stepped up to the deck, from which he blithely flipped over-

board the cabin-door key. Then he hurried toward the gangplank.

He went down it with as much speed as he dared muster. A cab was handy. He got in, gave orders to be driven to the home of Nick Loring.

He paid off the driver and ran up the walk to the front door of Loring's home. The butler, who responded to his ring, was shoved aside—and Rusty barged into the study . . . .

Nick Loring was behind a desk, nervously tapping the top of it with a pencil.

Rusty covered him with the automatic Rita had slipped into his pocket.

"Sorry, Mr. Loring," he said softly. "I'm not going to harm you, unless you make it necessary. I've uncovered your little plot and captured both LaFlamme and the countess. Because of Rita, I'm giving you a break. Get your things, and start traveling. I'll give you five hours start. They won't find the countess and the Frenchman for a long time. I left them on the ship."

"Rita?" Loring's face took on a crafty look. "So that's it. Very well, young man. I see there is no need to argue with you. I'll take the opportunity you offer. Give me one hour, and I'll disappear."

He rushed out of the room. Rusty sat down wearily. He fumbled in his pocket, found a battered cigarette and lit it. As he blew out the match, a car stopped in front of the house. Rita and the elderly man who had held Rusty a prisoner while Loring phoned for the fake police, came into the room. Rita stopped short, gasped, and with a little cry of delight, went into his arms.

"Rita," Rusty said softly. "I'm glad you came. I think I can clear myself now. I—I talked to your father. He—"

"What is that, young man?" the elderly man stepped closer. "You haven't talked to me, and I would like an explanation of this. Now I find her in your arms—you, a wanted murderer."

Rusty's jaw dropped. He gently put Rita aside.

"Are you Rita's father?" he asked quickly. "Are you Nick Loring?"

"I'm Rita's father, but I'm decidedly not Nick Loring. He happens to be my business partner, and he lives here—with me."

Rusty emitted a cry of elation and raced for the door. He ran up the wide staircase three steps at a time, but halfway to the top, a peremptory command brought him to a stop. He looked down at Nick Loring, who was close to the front door. The crooked broker held a heavy gun in his hand.

"Come down with your hands in the air," he snapped. "When I heard this fool Chalmers and his daughter drive in, I knew my little act would collapse. Don't try any silly idea of jumping this gun."

Rusty went down the steps slowly, every muscle tensed for a leap that would land him atop this murderous crook. Chalmers and Rita came into the hallway and were instantly covered by the gun. As the weapon swerved to menace them, Rusty leaped.

But Loring was no slouch with a gun. He fired once. Rusty's leap ended with a headlong pitch down the few remaining steps to the floor. His shoulder felt as though a white-hot poker had been driven through it.

Loring grabbed Rita, pulled her in front of him and jabbed his gun against the back of her neck.

"You, Chalmers," he snapped, "go into the study and bring out that suitcase of bonds. If you try to phone for help, or come out with a gun in your hand, I'll kill Rita—shoot her through the head."

RUSTY lay very quiet, but through slitted eyes he watched the tense scene being enacted in this hall. Chalmers, pale and shaking with fury, had no alternative but to obey. He returned with the suitcase and dropped it near the door.

Loring backed out, picking up the bag as he went. With Rita still acting as an unwilling shield, he reached the sedan in which Chalmers and Rita had arrived.

Rusty struggled to his feet. He held an automatic in his right hand, but to fire would mean instant death for Rita. Loring sneered at the two men, forced the girl into the front seat and slid himself behind the wheel. He started the car, keeping the gun firm against Rita's neck.

He accelerated quickly, the moment the hood of the sleek car faced the street. As he rounded the corner to hit the highway, he flung Rita from the car.

Rusty was first to reach her. She was bruised and shaken, but not otherwise injured.

Rita's father put an arm about the girl, and the trio hurried back to the house. Without a word, Chalmers picked up the telephone in the hallway and called a number. The connection completed, he gave brisk orders.

"Interrupt any program," he said. "I am placing an important news dispatch on the air. Connect this telephone directly to a mike—and hurry!"

He faced Rusty. "Feel well enough to broadcast?" he asked.

"As it happens, young man, I own a radio station. At this moment the closing market reports are being broadcast. They will be interrupted, and you will take the air to inform the police what has happened. They'll be at the offices of the bank recently held up. The radio there will be tuned in to get these reports. You've got to convince them to close every exit from the city and capture Loring."

"Perfect," Rusty cried. "When everything is ready, give me that phone and the marker plate-numbers of your car. Loring will count on us taking a long time to convince the police, so he will hardly abandon the car soon."

Rita moved close to Rusty and helped him remove his coat. She slit his shirt and exposed the wound. Hastily she ran for antiseptics. Her father assumed the rôle of announcer when he was informed that the telephone was connected with a mike.

"We interrupt this broadcast," he said in clear-cut tones, "to give you a news bulletin meant especially for the police at work trying to solve the holdup of the Security Trust Company. The man who is responsible for the solution of this great crime will tell you in his own words exactly what has happened. I introduce a man who shall henceforth be known as the Ghost Reporter."

With a twinkle in his eyes he handed Rusty the phone. Rusty began to talk fast.

"The men who held up the Security Trust turned the loot over to a man named Henri LaFlamme. He, in turn, conveyed the bonds to the *Ambassador*, a ship that is already in the river heading out to sea. Countess Ivanovna was to have accepted those bonds, taken them to Europe and disposed of them, before a description would normally reach the Continent via the regular mail channels. LaFlamme and the Countess are tied up and locked in her cabin. Harbor police can effect their capture.

"The real head of this gang is Nick Loring, who is fleeing at this moment in a black sedan, registration number 3Y-4938. Block all roads and bridges. He is armed and will not hesitate to shoot. In the car is a suitcase full of the bonds.

"The gang hired ordinary gunmen to do the actual stickup work. The loot was transferred immediately to LaFlamme, who waited at an appointed spot. He brought the bonds to a ship, ready to sail a few moments after the holdup, before police could finish getting the facts.

"You will find this clears up three other similar jobs perpetrated during the last two years. Loring, as a legitimate stock broker, knew when big hauls could be easily effected. He acted as the inside man and the leader. Get him!"

RUSTY hung up and emitted a long whistle.

"I can identify the man who kidnaped me and stuck up the bank," he told Chalmers. "The capture of the entire gang will clear me and solve the murder of Jack Sherman. I can easily prove that the bullets which wounded Sergeant Donovan were meant for me, and not to effect my escape. It's been swell doing this kind of work, even if I had to stop a slug to finish the job. I'm not going to relish going back to society reporting."

"But you can see me often—if you do," Rita said as she gently cleansed the wound. "Won't that mean something?"

"It will offset anything I don't like about the job," said Rusty, grinning.

# Murder's Red Nails

## By Phil Richards

Author of "The Murder Print."

*Nick Forbes staked his eye-power against laboratory clues—and tried to link murder with a sophisticated girl's fingernails.*

THE overdressed little partridge of a dame wanted Nick Forbes to hunt for her lap dog, her Fluffy-duffles. The private dick winced. He gazed wryly at a note on his desk. Pasted-up words, clipped from newspaper sub-headlines, announced that he was scheduled for the morgue—unless he lost interest in the Burtz mob.

His tone was ill-humored. "You're in the wrong department, madam."

The woman flounced out, and Nick Forbes slumped in his chair. Three years as stroke oar of his college crew had fashioned him into a nightmare for the fitter of ready-made clothes. The iron in his soul gave his handsome face a hard cast.

"A dog-catcher!" he muttered. "What next?"

"A job in dad's brokerage company," said pretty, golden-haired Joyce Cornell, who wore an engagement ring. Sympathy shone in her glistening eyes, but her jaw set determinedly. "Don't you see? The small-time, lone-wolf private detective is dated. His outmoded methods can't compete with the laboratory. What sort of prospective clients come in? Men wanting divorce evidence framed, and alimony-greedy females—m e a n, snooping, stool-pigeon jobs that you can't take."

"Darling," said Forbes dejectedly, "the Burtz mob murdered my brother. My business is to get them. In the meantime —I've got to live."

"You're a college-trained accountant," said Joyce. "You could qualify for the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Nick smiled bitterly. "And get on a waiting list of nine hundred. Even if I landed an FBI berth, I'd probably spend my life checking the false entries of embezzling cashiers." He clasped her hands. "Dear, please have patience. If I break the Burtz gang, I'm set. I wouldn't be worth a runner's wage selling stocks and bonds. Eliminating rats is my work."

"That note—" murmured the girl. "I'm afraid, Nick. You have no defense against those mad dogs."

Lew Burtz and his gang were the latest headline makers. Their Tommy-guns had slaughtered Nick's brother in a Brooklyn bank. Along the Eastern seaboard they'd committed a score of sensational daylight robberies. They'd collected fifty grand for five-year-old Kip Kenyon—delivered the lifeless body to the Kenyon mansion in a mail sack. Twice Nick had found their abandoned hideouts, which explained the note.

"My eyes are my defense," the dick said. He glanced at the title page of a monograph that long had occupied his late hours. "Laboratories m u s t have clues. At the moment my eyes are giving me a lot of clues that say you're gorgeous."

The daughter of a wealthy stock broker, Joyce was doing Nick's secretarial work with the unconcealed intention of persuading the detective to quit.

ANOTHER prospective customer entered. A slender brunette, modishly dressed in an expensively-tailored gray suit. Nick got up. She was strangely exotic—a showgirl, no doubt. Under a shiny shark-skin Breton, a rich mass of raven-black ringlets accentuated the dark pallor of a smooth, clear complexion. Some of her assurance, her air of super-saturated sophistication, vanished before the sharp

gaze of the dick. He nodded. The girl sat down.

"I'm Diane Abbott," she spoke in a husky, musical, cultured voice. She paused, shifting her glance to the highly polished nails of a tapering hand, probably to recapture her poise—the psychological edge of arrogance. Nick gazed at her doubled fingers. His lids flickered a little. The hand was as flawless as the face.

We've leased the Drew home on the Island," said Miss Abbott. "My cousin is being married. Tonight we're having a reception. Ticker tape has been reading the right way lately, and there are loads of gifts . . . . Well, the Burtz gang are still at large, and—"

Again Miss Abbott glanced at her nails. "I've been to several agencies, but the available men were—ah—lacking *savoir faire*. I read your advertisement, recalled seeing your picture in the *Star-Express*. I'm sure you won't be obvious in dress clothes."

Nick flushed, for Joyce was making a face at him. He crooked his fingers, glanced at his nails, as though seeking refuge from embarrassment.

"I'll take the assignment, Miss Abbott."

"My car is waiting. The chauffeur will drive you home."

"That won't be necessary," said Nick, motioning to the adjoining room. "I keep an adequate wardrobe here for such contingencies. It'll take a minute or so. If you'll pardon me?"

Nick entered the small room, closed the door. Presently he was back, having changed from a business gray to a rough tweed. He carried a suitcase large enough to hold dress clothes without wrinkling them.

"Miss Cornell," he addressed Joyce briskly, "you need not stay after you finish the letters." He gave a start. "Why, what's wrong with your fingernails?"

Joyce's eyebrows arched. She held a hand in front of her. "You mean the brand of lacquer?"

Nick pressed thumb and forefinger against his eyeballs. "Sorry. I'm seeing dots." He smiled sheepishly, spoke apologetically to his client. "Too much close work. I've been writing a rather extensive monograph on 'The Study of Innate Gestures as Applied to Criminal Apprehension.' If you're ready, Miss—"

Sirens shrieked. On the street ten floors below burst forth angry, frenzied shouts and the wild clamor of fleeing pedestrians. Women screamed. An automatic cracked wickedly. Gears ground. The juicy whistle from a punctured tire shrilled out. Then came a resounding clang and clatter as an automobile crashed into something. An agonized howl broke a fleeting lull. A Tommy-gun thudded into action.

The mad confusion stripped the suavity from Nick's client. Savagery blazed in sloe eyes. The killer showed naked. The client sprang to a tense crouch. Rouged lips drew back viciously. Slender, carmine-tipped fingers darted into the handbag, came out wrapped around the butt of a snub-nosed automatic. Crackling curses shot from the cupid's bow mouth.

"You dirty, louse-bound, sluefoot son of a—"

The automatic snarled. Joyce uttered a fear-freighted cry. The slug burrowed into the suitcase hurtling at the client. Nick got a .38 out of a shoulder holster and put a jagged hole in the wrist of his foe's gunhand. The automatic went spinning, and then Nick was in close, clicking steel cuffs.

He slapped up the brim of the Breton. The mass of ringlets slipped back, revealing a man's straight, thinning hair.

Nick shoved his moaning, cursing prisoner into a chair. "Sounded like your car got into a losing argument. Guess it's no go on that little ride you jobbies planned for me."

He turned to Joyce, who was shocked and bewildered by the sudden burst of things. "I phoned headquarters from the next office. The prowl cars got here almost too quickly."

A plainclothes man barged in, holding a handkerchief to a bloodied cheek. "Not bad, Nick. We got Burtz, an' three of his gunners. Messed 'em up, but they'll live to fry."

"No!" blurted the erstwhile Miss Abbott. "Not the hot squat! I'm innocent. I never put the heat on anybody. Forbes,

you gotta help me! I'll turn state's evidence. Burtz scragged your brother." The prisoner blubbered. "I'm no rod man. I was only fronting—"

TREVISSON, the headquarters dick, yanked off the crook's wig. "We knew Burtz had a doll casin' for him, but we never thought— Guess the Dillinger business soured them babies on molls."

He turned to Nick. "Mink Reece—a song-and-dance artist, headliner out West before vaudeville hit the skids. Murdered his Mexican wife somewhere in Chihuahua. The last I heard, he was playing clip joints in Singapore and Port Said."

Trevission tilted Reece's chin. "Take a gander at that pan. Ziegfeld never hired a profile that topped this runt's. An' them gams—Jest out of a stocking ad. Can't figure how you caught wise."

Nick grinned. "Permit me to quote from 'The Study of Innate Gestures as Applied to Criminal Apprehension,' a monograph—unpublished—by one Nicholas Forbes.

" 'The male inspects his fingernails solely to ascertain whether they need grooming. Therefore he merely crooks his fingers, palm inward. The female is motivated by feminine vanity. Theoretically, the colored, brilliant nails climax the beauty of her hand. It is instinctive for her to admire the entire composition. Therefore she holds her hand up, palm outward.' "

Joyce nodded, flashed Nick a dazzling smile. "The eyes have it, detective."

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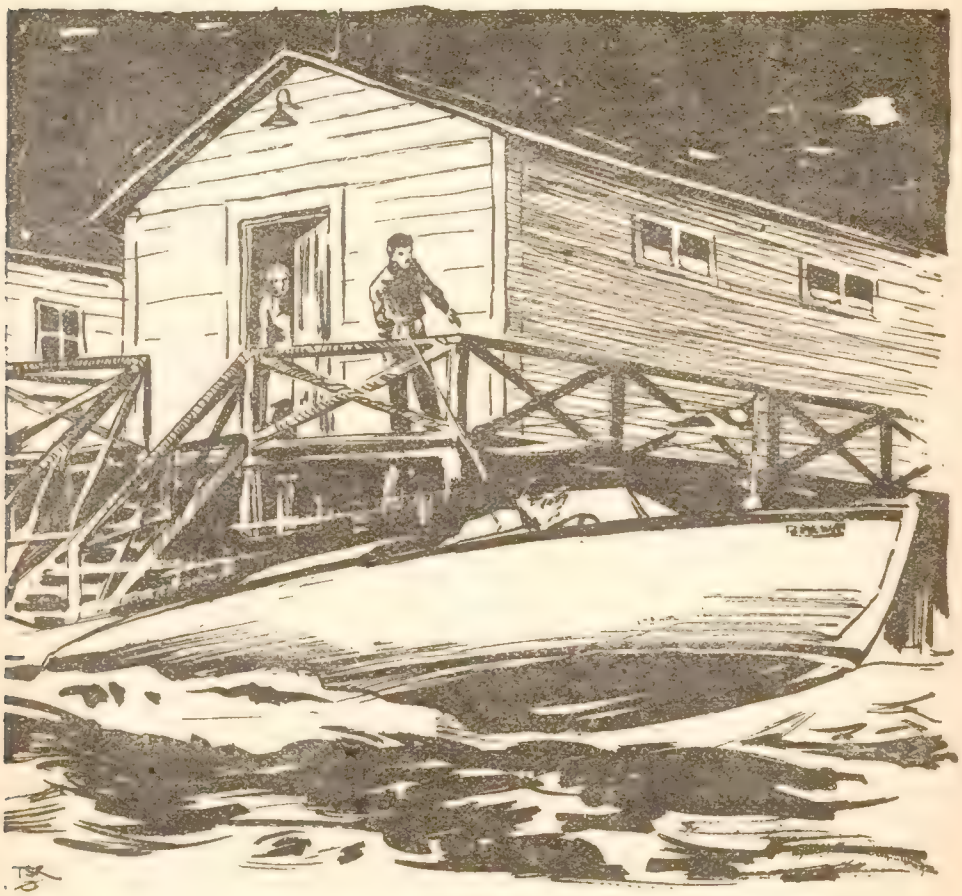
*Death plucked at Marty Quade, the quick-thinking New York sleuth, with a murder-frought message. And Quade was quick to grab up the challenge of a sharpshooter's trigger-timed setup, eagerly catching the gunpowder-gauntlet tossed by the Devil himself—who was chuckling when he flung the dick that fool's lure to a . . . .*

# Bullet-Battle Treasure



## By Emile C. Tepperman

**Author of "Killers' Club Car," etc.**

IT was a hot night, and the Miami Beach Dog Track was jammed to capacity. The crowd was noisy and sweaty, and the greyhounds hadn't been running to form at all tonight. By the end of the sixth, Marty Quade was out forty dollars, and his collar was wilted, and the holstered automatic under the left armpit of his Palm Beach jacket was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

Marty had bet on the number-one dog, which always has a bit of an edge on

the rest, because it runs on the inside of the track. But the number-one dog had come in fourth, which was as good as last. He tore up his mutuel ticket in disgust, and was pushing his way through the crowd toward the kennels, with a view to inspecting the dogs as they were weighed in for the next race. It was at that moment that the loud speaker over the field blared a message:

*"Call for Mr. Quade! If Mr. Marty Quade is here at the track, kindly come to the main gate. There is an urgent message for him!"*

Marty frowned. The clerk at his hotel knew he was at the dog track tonight, and might very well have relayed a call to him here. But Marty couldn't imagine what sort of message could be that urgent. He had come down to Miami a few days ago on business, had finished the job, and was now wholly pleasure bent for the next week or so.

Reluctantly he turned away from the kennels, made his way toward the main gate. A skinny little man was standing there, beside the gate attendant, looking anxiously around. He was sweating profusely, and he carried his jacket over his arm. His tie was pulled open at the collar, and he was wiping his neck with a handkerchief which was sopping wet.

The loud speaker on the field began to repeat the call for Mr. Quade, and Marty said to the attendant: "Get them to turn that thing off. I'm Quade."

The skinny little man exclaimed: "That's good! I'm the one who's looking for you." He gripped Marty's sleeve, started to drag him out through the gate.

Marty jerked his sleeve out of the man's grip. "Hold everything, mister," he said irritably. "What's the gag? I'm out forty bucks here, and you want to drag me away. If this is a practical joke—"

"No, no! My name is Schaeffer. This is no joke. Listen to me. Here—" eagerly he dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money, peeled off a bill carelessly—"here's a hundred dollars. That'll make up your losses, and to spare!"

Marty took the hundred grudgingly. "Well, if you're handing out centuries, it can't be a practical joke. What's the angle?"

Schaeffer was again dragging him out. "Let's go, I'll tell you on the way. I phoned my lawyer in New York—Michael Scanlon—and he told me to find you. He said you were down here, and that you were the best man he knew to help me. It's my daughter I'm worried about, not myself. Please come. I'll tell you all about it on the way, and I'll pay you well—anything you ask."

"If Mike Scanlon sent you," Marty conceded, "I guess you're all right." He allowed himself to be pulled out into the street. "Just what are you worried about, Mr. Schaeffer?"

Schaeffer kept on mopping himself. "It's like this: I bought a parcel of land on the ocean front, and now they're going to kill my daughter. You've got to contact them, make them lay off. You know how to do those things, where the police would only mess it up."

"Wait a minute," Marty broke in. "What has buying a parcel of land got to do with your daughter's getting killed? And who wants to kill her?"

Schaeffer was pulling him across the street toward the parking lot. "Let's get in my car, and I'll explain while we're driving. Luckily, we're staying at the Palm Gardens Hotel, where you're staying. You can—"

His voice ended in a high screech as a car without lights darted out from the parking space, gathering speed and swerving directly at them. Marty caught a swift glimpse of two men in the front seat; with set, hard faces. He heard the roar of the motor being accelerated in second speed, saw the heavy auto rushing straight at them. In another instant the front of that machine would smash them, hurl their broken bodies into the air. He acted instinctively, with the speed of perfectly coördinated muscles.

QUADE'S left hand moved forward in a straight-arm jab that sent the diminutive Mr. Schaeffer stumbling headlong across the gutter, out of the path of the roaring juggernaut. At the

same time he himself leaped backward to the curb. The auto raced on between him and Schaeffer, hitting neither. Its brakes screeched raucously, and the car slowed up, fifty feet beyond them.

A head appeared out of the side window, and beside it was the muzzle of a sub-machine gun. The gun began to chatter, and lead pellets gouged the concrete of the street, marching swiftly along toward the spot where Mr. Schaeffer stood. The little man screamed, and began to run. But the hail of slugs sped after him, caught up to him, and fairly cut him in two.

Marty Quade had moved swiftly, his automatic coming out of his shoulder holster almost before the Thompson began to stutter its bloody message of death. He was pumping lead at the car in unison with the sub-machine gun, but he could not get a clear shot at the gunner, who was at the far window, on the other side from him. Marty shot through the rear window of the car, but the gunner was crouching low over his Thompson, and Marty's slugs couldn't reach him.

By the time Marty had fired three shots, the Thompson had emptied its entire clip, and Schaeffer's body was nothing but a bloody mass of quivering flesh in the gutter. Marty's eyes were bleak, and his lips drawn in a thin, tight line, as he leaped toward the car, running to the side window, through which he could get a straight shot at the man behind the machine gun. But the killer's work was done. Suddenly the car's motor roared, gathered speed, and shot away down the street, almost running over a uniformed policeman, who had appeared from inside the dog track.

Marty stopped running, raised his gun at arm's length, and coldly, deliberately, emptied his clip at the speeding auto. He shot for the right rear tire, and he hit it. The car swerved violently, but its driver was an expert. He brought it out of the skid, braked it to a stop and the doors on both sides opened. Two men leaped out, started running in opposite directions. In a moment they had disappeared around the corner at the end of the street, one going to the right, the other to the left. The uniformed cop was shooting at them, but he missed, and the killers were gone.

There was pandemonium in the street. Men and women had come rushing out from the track. The women stood there, screaming at sight of Schaeffer's lifeless, bloody body, which lay pitifully in the gutter. In a moment a thick crowd had gathered. The cop was waving his gun wildly with one hand, and blowing sharply on the police whistle in his other hand. He was tied up in the milling mass of people at the track gate, and couldn't push out.

Marty, however was clear of the crowd, and he launched himself toward the corner—after the two fugitives. There was nothing to be done for Schaeffer. The little man was as dead as he would ever be, and Marty had his hundred dollars. That hundred dollars he considered, had established the relationship of Schaeffer to himself as a client; and he was going to earn it.

He rounded the corner into Commerce Street, taking after the man who had turned right. He was feeling in his pocket for an extra clip for his empty automatic, and he cursed under his breath as he remembered that he had not provided himself with any when he left the hotel that evening. He hadn't been expecting to be launched into any such fantastic gun battle as this.

The sidewalk along Commerce Street was cleared, and people were pressing back against the fronts of the concession booths which lined the way. Marty saw that the reason for this was that the fugitive killer had just passed that way, waving his gun in the air. He caught a glimpse of his man racing through the wide entrance of the new, million-dollar amusement pier, which jutted out into the ocean from the foot of Commerce Street. Down at this end of Miami Beach were all the concessions, slot-machine booths, gambling casinos and rifle galleries, à la Coney Island, where tourists came to spend their money every night. People were shouting wildly, pointing at the fugitive gunner. From behind, there came more shouts from the crowd in

front of the Dog Track. Police whistles were screeching shrilly from every direction.

Marty was racing after his man, when the fugitive stopped just within the arcade of the amusement pier, raised his gun and fired. The slug whined over Marty's head, and the man set himself for another shot. It was evident that he wanted to get rid of the immediate menace of Marty, so that he would have time to slip in among the thousands crowding the pier, and lose himself. He might even be able to escape by diving off the end of the pier and swimming back to shore.

Marty threw himself to the ground, just as the killer fired again, and the man missed once more. But his slug, whistling above Marty's head, caught the bluecoat who was turning the corner into Commerce Street. The lead pellet smashed into the cop's chest, whirled him around, and slammed him back, almost around the corner. Once more the killer aimed at Marty.

Marty cursed, dived toward the concession booth in front of which he had dropped. It was a rifle gallery, in front of which a customer at the counter was holding in his hand one of the automatic rifles, with which he had been about to try his skill on the clay pigeons. Slugs from the fugitive killer's gun were screeching in the air. The man was intent on killing Marty before he got going again. Marty seized the rifle from the customer's hand, pushed the man out of the way, and jumped up on the counter of the rifle gallery, lay prone on the board, and sighted at the killer. It was the only way he could get a shot at his man, because the muzzle of the rifle was chained to the counter, so that it was impossible to swing it in order to aim at anything in the street.

THE killer was standing with feet wide apart, pumping lead at Marty. A shot crunched into the wood of the counter beneath Marty's head, sent splinters flying upward. Marty sighted coolly, pulled the trigger of the rifle. The distance was more than twice that for which the rifle was intended to be used, and there was a bit of breeze. He fired high, at a spot two inches above the man's forehead, and considerably to the left. He held his breath, hoping his wind allowance was correct.

In the act of pulling the trigger for a fourth shot, the killer's hand suddenly opened, and nerveless fingers allowed his weapon to drop. A small black hole appeared directly above the bridge of the man's nose. He crumpled to the ground.

Marty grunted, put down the rifle, and rolled off the counter. And a heavy hand descended on his shoulder, gripping it hard. A harsh, authoritative voice ordered: "Stand still, you!"

Marty swung his eyes, frowned at the heavy-set man in the uniform of a Miami Beach Police sergeant, who was holding him with one hand, and covering him with a service revolver in the other. "Gun-fighting in the street, huh?" the sergeant growled. "We'll show you New York gangsters that it don't pay to start nothing like this down here!"

Marty's cheeks flushed a dull red. "You damn' fool!" he said hotly. "I just bagged the murderer of that little chap around the corner—that man over by the pier, who also just shot one of your own patrolmen. His pal got away, in the other direction."

"Yeah?" The sergeant was cynical. "I just got here in the squad car. All I seen was you and this other guy shooting at each other." He let go of Marty, backed away a step, still keeping him covered, and picked up Marty's automatic from the ground, where he had let it drop when he dived for the rifle. "This your gun?"

Marty nodded. "Yes, it's my gun. Instead of wasting time here, why don't you get out an alarm for the other killer? And there's danger to the daughter of the little fellow who was shot in front of the dog track. Get some men over to protect her."

"Listen, you!" the sergeant barked. "Don't you tell me how to run my business. First, you give an explanation of yourself. You ain't talkin' yourself outta this killing. I saw you drop that guy with the rifle!"

Marty shrugged resignedly. "My name is Quade," he said patiently. "I'm a private detective from New York. I was at the track when Schaeffer—that's the chap who's lying in the street around the corner—had me paged at the track. He started to tell me his daughter was in danger, and just then the fireworks began. That's all I know about it. These people—" Marty waved to the crowds pressing in close about them—"will tell you that we were attacked."

"Sure, sure, that's your story. But you'll have to be held on a homicide charge. You got a license as a private dick in Florida?"

"No. I wasn't down here on business."

"Then you got no business carrying this automatic. You just stand still, right here, till the homicide detail comes."

"But I tell you," Marty insisted, "there's a girl likely to be killed while you're fooling around here. It has something to do with a parcel of land."

The sergeant guffawed. "Parcel of land! You think you can pull gags on me? What's a parcel of land got to do with a triple shooting? Nix, mister. I only know what I see. And I seen you shoot this guy between the eyes. So I'm holding you."

"But the girl—"

"Where is she?"

"In Miami. You've got to get some protection for her."

"Sorry, mister, but you ought to know we got no authority in Miami. Miami Beach is a separate city from Miami, and we got a separate police department. After you're booked, maybe homicide will phone to Miami and have 'em bring in this girl. What's her name, an' where's she staying?"

Marty said tightly, restraining himself with an effort: "Listen, sergeant, why don't you use your head? This man Schaeffer was killed. Some one means business. If that some one was willing to knock a man off in public, right in front of the dog track, there must also be danger for Schaeffer's daughter. If the girl should be killed, her blood would be on your conscience."

Somebody in the crowd called out: "He's all right, Sergeant Green. I saw the whole thing. This man was attacked."

Sergeant Green turned to the interrupter, growled: "Mind your own damn' business! I'm holding this guy."

He didn't get any farther than that, because Marty took advantage of the second in which Sergeant Green's eyes were not on him. His bunched fist came up in a short arc that caught the sergeant behind the ear with a terrific *thwack*. The sergeant grunted, started to buckle, and Marty twisted the service revolver out of his fingers, launched himself through the crowd. A cop who had come with Green, and who was down at the pier looking at the dead body of the killer, shouted, "Hey there, stop that man!" and started to run toward them.

Marty jumped over the counter of the rifle gallery, raced toward the rear. The crowd was shouting, milling in the street behind him, and the cop was running and blowing his whistle shrilly. Marty had seen a back door, behind the swinging target in the shooting gallery, and he made for this, his foot slipping on spent shells which littered the floor. He knew that the backs of these concessions along Commerce Street opened on the ocean; so he was prepared for a cold swim in order to escape from the clutches of the obtuse Sergeant Green. He wanted to do something about the immediate danger which he was convinced threatened the daughter of the man who had been murdered in front of the dog track.

He slipped through the back door, just as a shot from the pursuing patrolman's gun *spanged* into the swinging target alongside his head. He slammed the door shut, found himself on a small open platform, against which the ocean lapped gently. He was already shucking off his coat, when his eyes lighted on something that made him grin widely.

Directly opposite the platform, was the pier of the Miami Beach Kennel Club, and tied up at the pier were half a dozen speedboats, in which people had come to visit the track.

Travel, by speedboat, is quite popular in Miami, because the broad expanse of Biscayne Bay, lying between Miami

proper, and Miami Beach, offers a perfect stretch of water for aquatic speed enthusiasts. It is on Biscayne Bay that the famous Gar Wood hangs up new records every year. And the yacht basin is always full of speedboats, house boats, and palatial launches. The half dozen speedboats tied up at the Kennel Club pier begged Marty to take them.

MARTY kept his coat on when he dived off the platform, holding Sergeant Green's revolver in his teeth. A few powerful strokes carried him over to the nearest of the speedboats. Over its side he pulled himself, just as the rear door of the shooting gallery opposite was burst open. The patrolman appeared, gun in hand, and spotted Marty throwing off the rope which secured the boat to the pier. He called out: "Stand still!"

Marty yelled, "Wait—don't shoot!" and slid into the seat under the wheel of the boat. In the second that patrolman stood, undecided, Marty stepped on the starter—and the motor turned over, humming sweetly. The boat was a beauty, and she answered at once when he threw the stick into forward. She purred, shot out from the pier. Marty twisted the wheel in a tight sharp curve, almost under the feet of the patrolman

If he could have been sure that the police were headed by Captain Slocum, whom he knew well, he would have taken the chance of landing there. Slocum would not be as bull-headed as the Miami Beach sergeant. Captain Slocum was a veteran of the New York Police force whom Marty had known when he pounded a beat. But Marty wasn't taking any chance, right now, of falling into unsympathetic hands.

At the Royal Palm dock all was quiet. An attendant threw him a line, saluted him on the platform. The bluecoat fired pointblank, and the slug smashed into the polished mahogany of the boat. Then Marty was out from under, feeding her gas to the limit, racing out around the wide curve of the Beach Island, with the spray eddying out behind him, and the wind whining above the top of the narrow windshield. He was cutting across the breakers, instead of riding them, and the boat throbbed perilously, until it seemed that the engine would be torn from its moorings. But Marty held the course, grimly, zigzagging sharply, so as to avoid the slugs that poured after him.

The cushion-banked motor pulled the boat bravely. It reached thirty, then forty, fifty, sixty miles an hour. Marty kept it at that around the wide curve of Miami Beach, which brought him directly into the ship channel alongside the County Causeway across Biscayne Bay, connecting the Beach with the City of Miami.

The shots had died away. Ahead of him, the skyline of Miami glowed, brilliantly alive with its row of tall hotels, gayly lighted, suggestive of a miniature New York skyline. Marty paid little attention to the skyline, however. He held the wheel hard, guiding the boat along the ship channel, keeping as far from the palm-lined causeway as he could.

It was a three-and-a-half mile run in along the ship channel across Biscayne Bay—five minutes in time, at the most. He wondered if the telephone wires weren't crackling with requests to the city police to pick him up as soon as he landed. His eyes strained keenly for any sign of unusual activity around the municipal docks at the foot of Bay Front Park. Under the lamps on the dock, he thought he could discern shadowy figures moving, grouping near the water. If those were police waiting to welcome him, he would have to avoid them somehow. He veered sharply to the left, stood away from the municipal docks, and pulled in half a mile further down, at the private docks of the Royal Palm Club, at the mouth of the Miami River.

Here, all was quiet. A dock attendant threw him a line, saluted him respectfully. Then the attendant's eyes widened at sight of the heavy service revolver, and at sight of Marty's clothes, which were dripping-wet from his short swim. Marty hastily pocketed the gun, said to the attendant: "Look. Can you use this?"

The man gasped, fingered the hundred dollar bill which Marty pushed into his hand.

"Get me a dry coat from somewhere. Forget you saw me, and you can keep the bill."

The attendant gave him a queer glance, went to a locker, and came back with a blue coat. "It belongs to one of the members, sir. But I guess you can have it—for a hundred!"

Marty hastily discarded his Palm Beach jacket, donned the blue one. "Now, remember, you forget about me, or I'll come back and wring that hundred out of you!"

The man nodded wordlessly. Marty pushed swiftly through the spacious grounds of the Royal Palm Club, and went out into Brickell Avenue. He walked swiftly to East Flagler Street, passing Bay Front Park, where the municipal dock was located. He grinned to himself tightly, as he saw the cordon of police stretched across the entrance of the park. They were still waiting for him to land from the bay. In a little while they would wake up to the fact that he might have gone around to the Royal Palm Dock. Marty hastened up Flagler Street, putting as much distance between himself and the police cordon as he could. He turned north on Biscayne Boulevard, crossed the street, and entered the Palm Garden Hotel.

He was watching warily as he went in, to see whether the police had set a trap for him here. That was unlikely, for he hadn't said where he was staying, and it would take them a little while to trace the original call to the dog track—if they even thought of doing that. Anyway, they wouldn't be looking for him here so soon. Nevertheless, he did not relax his vigilance.

Quade saw the tall man at the far end of the lobby, who turned away quickly and went into the elevator, but he gave no sign that he noticed. He went over to the desk, across which the clerk said: "Did you get the call at the Dog Track, Mr. Quade? Mr. Schaeffer is one of our guests, and he was very anxious to find you."

"Yes, I got it," Marty told him grimly. "What room did Mr. Schaeffer have?"

"*Did* he have, Mr. Quade? He still has it. He hasn't checked out that I know of. His daughter's up there now, waiting for him, and two gentlemen just went up to see her. Is—anything wrong?"

"You don't know the half of it," Marty said. "What room number?"

"Four-eleven, sir.

"All right. Don't announce me. Now, get this—have your switchboard operator get me Michael Scanlon, the attorney, in New York. If he's in bed, I want him routed out. If he's playing the night clubs, I want him traced. But I want to talk to him! When she gets him, connect me at Schaeffer's room."

"Certainly, Mr. Quade. Michael Scanlon, the lawyer, in New York."

"And one more thing." Marty took out a ten-dollar bill, slipped it across the desk. "Mr. Schaeffer has been murdered—never mind the hysterics—" as the clerk grew pale, let his lower jaw hang slack—"and I shot it out with one of his killers. The police will be coming here pretty soon looking for me as a material witness or something. I need a little time before I talk to them. Could you—er—forget that I went up to Mr. Schaeffer's room?"

The clerk looked doubtfully at the ten-dollar bill. "Well—"

Marty sighed, took out two more tens and slid them across. "Still doubtful?"

The clerk smiled. "Not thirty dollars' worth, Mr. Quade. Depend on me. You've been with us before. I know you're on the square."

Marty left him, hurried into the elevator, which had just come down. While he had been talking to the clerk, he had noted that the elevator, into which the tall man had gone, had stopped at the fourth floor, as shown by the indicator. He put his right hand in his borrowed jacket pocket when he got off at the fourth floor, kept it there when he knocked at the door of 411.

There was no answer.

FROWNING, Marty rapped harder. A faint stirring sounded inside. Marty knew that slight rustle of motion behind the door was not meant for him to hear.

But the doors and walls of Miami buildings are notoriously thin, and he could distinctly trace by sound, the faint movements of those within—could tell that someone had come up close alongside the door.

The knob turned slowly, and Marty quickly stepped to one side. Suddenly the door was flung abruptly open, and a hand gripping an automatic was jabbed out at the spot where Marty would have been standing, if he hadn't moved.

Marty grinned thinly, and brought the barrel of Sergeant Green's service revolver down hard on the hand. There was a squeal, and the automatic dropped to the carpeted floor. Marty reached over, gripped the hand, and yanked hard. A squat body followed the hand, and Marty struck at the surprised face of the body's owner. His barrel caught the man on the forehead, and the man slumped. Marty shoved, fell inside the room.

There was a commotion in there, and Marty quickly picked up the fallen automatic, pocketed it. He stepped inside the door, kicked it shut behind him, stood astraddle the one he had knocked down, facing the man and the girl in the room. His service revolver was leveled at the man, who also had a gun in his fist—pointing at Marty. The man was the tall one who had left the lobby to come upstairs, only a few moments before.

The girl was not standing. She was pretty, young, with blonde hair and wide blue, frightened eyes. She was sitting on the bed near the bath-room door. Her hands were tied behind her, and she was gagged. Her pretty gingham dress was torn and rumpled, showing soft white skin here and there. Marty's eyes dropped to her feet. Her shoes and stockings had been removed, and beside her feet there was a pitcher of boiling, hot water, from which the steam was rising with a hissing noise. The girl's bare, right foot was raw, red and blistered about the toes.

Marty's eyes were cold and bleak, as he swung them back to the tall man, who still had his gun pointed at him. Marty said through clenched teeth: "You al-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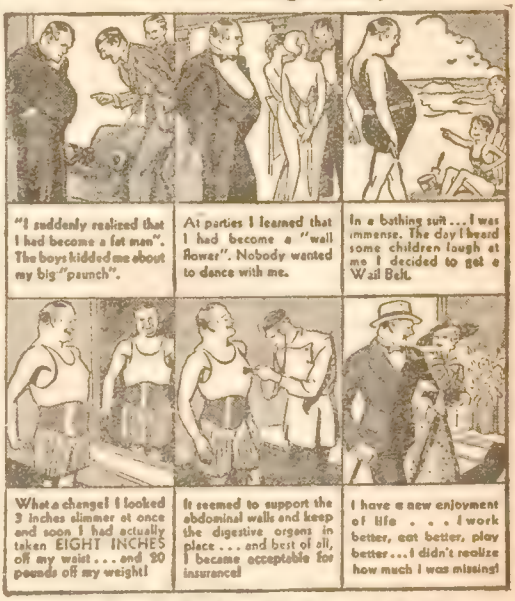
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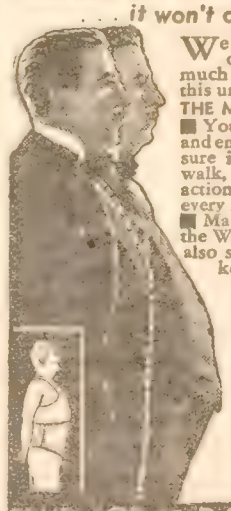

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ways were a rat, Lister. I saw you down in the lobby. I didn't think you'd get down to boiling a girl's feet, though!"

Lister kept brittle eyes on Marty. His lips parted in a grin. "So what, Quade? We know each other from New York. I'm sorry you got pulled into this, but it's damn' big—so big that we wouldn't let a little thing like a murder rap stand in our way. You ain't tied in this business, Quade. I always let you alone in New York, and you always let me alone. Do it now. Step outta here, and don't mix. It ain't nothing out of your pocket."

"Sorry, Lister," Marty murmured. "Mr. Schaeffer gave me a hundred dollars before." He stopped, letting his eyes flick to the girl. She did not know, maybe, that her father was dead. "Well, he gave me a hundred dollars. That makes him and his daughter my clients. Understand?"

Lister's thin face grew pale. "So what, Quade?" he blustered. "I got the drop on you, and you got the drop on me. We're both tough. Who's gonna shoot first?"

Marty's lips tightened. "I'm going to shoot when I count three," he said steadily. "You can shoot any time you want. But the way your gun is pointing, it won't stop me from shooting, too. So maybe we'll both kick in. Have you got the guts to shoot, Lister? Are you really tough?"

Lister's eyes shifted desperately. "Wait—" as Marty said a slow "one"—"for the love of Mike, Quade, don't be a sap. Can't we settle this some other way?"

"Marty said: *"Two!"* Then he added: "Sure, we can settle it some other way—by you dropping your gun before the next count."

Marty's lips started to form *three*, when Lister groaned, his face haggard. With frantic desperation he opened his fingers, let his gun drop to the floor. "Don't shoot, Quade!" he begged.

Marty let out a sigh of relief. "I thought you were going to play at being real tough, that time, Lister!" He kicked the other's gun under the bed, nodded reassuringly to the girl. "Now," he ordered, "untie her, and take off the gag. And if

your foot slips in that pitcher of boiling water, I won't be sorry!"

Lister threw a furtive glance toward his unconscious partner on the floor near the door, then another behind him toward the bath room. He looked as if he were contemplating a dash into the bath room, but Marty said curtly: "Don't be too wise for your own good, Lister. I'd just love to shoot down a guy who burns girls' feet!"

Lister was about to reach for the girl's wrists, when the telephone rang. Marty backed to it, picked it up, and said: "Well?"

"Mr. Quade?" It was the clerk's voice.

Marty said: "This is Quade. Got that call yet?" His eyes left Lister for long enough to look down at the telephone table, upon which lay an open fountain pen and a long legal document. Marty caught the typewritten words:

*And all that certain parcel of land situated and lying 262 feet and eleven inches northwest of Grant Avenue, adjoining and abutting upon the Ocean Front of the City of Miami Beach in the County of Dade which is in the State of Florida . . . .*"

The Clerk's voice announced: "We've got Mr. Scanlon for you, Mr. Quade. Here he is."

MARTY welcomed the voice of Mike Scanlon while he kept his gun pointed at Lister. He saw the girl struggling frantically against the gag in her mouth. Her eyes were wide, and she seemed to be trying to convey some message. Marty grinned at her, said: "We'll have you out of this in a jiffy, Miss Schaeffer." Then, into the phone: "Mike, you old son-of-a-gun, what's this stuff you wished on me? Who told you I wanted business down here? Who's this Schaeffer?"

Scanlon chuckled at him from New York. "Did you meet him?"

"Did I! Say, he provided some first-class excitement. What's the lowdown?"

"I'll tell you, Marty. He's got some queer idea that a brother of his—you remember Arty Schaeffer, who was hanged in Florida for mail robbery?—well, Arty

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"Yeah," Marty said drily. "He handed me a laugh all right—on a slab. Those were no hallucinations he had, Mike. It was the goods."

"Holy mackerel!" Scanlon exclaimed. "Do you know what that means? There's a reward of a hundred thousand dollars for the recovery of that loot. Say, Marty, don't forget to cut me in on it when you break the case!"

"How does a guy named Lister figure in it?" Marty asked. "Or don't you know?"

"Come to think of it, Schaeffer mentioned Lister over the phone. He said that Lister and a man named Dwyer—Marvin Dwyer—were trying to get that land away from him."

"Marvin Dwyer!" Marty exclaimed. The name was a household word in the underworld of New York. Marvin Dwyer was known to be the man who financed all the outstanding raids. It was he who had furnished the funds which had put Trokis back in business when he was forced to flee from the G-men, without money or guns, one night. It was Dwyer who had financed the surgical operations which had changed the faces of a dozen public enemies. It was entirely understandable how a man like Marvin Dwyer would know about the hiding place of Arty Schaeffer's loot.

Marty said softly: "Thanks for the information, Mike. I'll let you know how I make out." He cradled the phone, looking inquiringly at the girl, who was struggling in her bonds, and at Lister,

who was shifting from one foot to the other. "What's the truble, Lister?" he asked. And in that instant he knew . . . .

A gun was jabbed in his back, and a cold voice said: "The trouble is that you didn't look in the bath room, Quade. That's what the skirt was trying to tell you."

Marty put his revolver down gently on the table, without being told to do so. He knew the voice. He sighed, turned around slowly, and said: "Hello, Dwyer. Since when do you go out on your own kills?"

THE man was very thin, with black, oily hair parted in the middle. His complexion was sallow, his eyes narrow and set close together. He had an automatic jabbed in Marty's ribs. "I'll tell you, Quade," he said. "This is a real big thing—a million dollars."

"Then that stuff is really buried on the land that Schaeffer bought?"

Dwyer nodded, his sharp little eyes fixed on Marty's face. "It's there Quade, and we can't get at it—except if we buy the land. We don't know exactly what part of the lot it's in, or how far down. We'd have to turn the whole thing over; and you can't do that in Miami Beach, without a permit—and you can't get a permit, unless you own the land. So I'm set on owning the land. Get the picture, Quade?"

"I get it," Marty said softly. "You were burning Miss Schaeffer's feet, to make her sign over this deed. You killed her old man—" Marty saw the girl start, and shudder when he said that— "and you wanted to make her sign because the property becomes hers by law."

Dwyer smiled thinly. "You always were fast on the uptake, Quade. Now the question is: Do you be good while we get this signed, or do we be bad?"

Marty grinned. "That's a nice way to put it." He shrugged. "If Miss Schaeffer is willing to turn it over, it's okay with me."

Dwyer's small eyes gleamed. He motioned to Lister. "Take off the gag!" He wiggled his gun at Marty. "Stand away from the table, Quade. I don't want you


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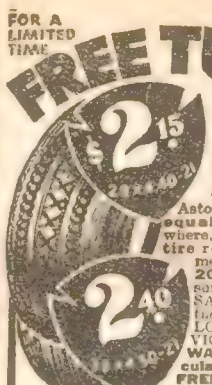


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| 30x5.25-20 | 2.95 | 1.15 |
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| 28x5.50-18 | 3.35 | 1.15 |
| 29x5.50-19 | 3.35 | 1.15 |
| 6.00-17 | 3.40 | 1.15 |
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| 33x4 | 2.95 | .85 | |
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| 34x7 | $10.95 | $3.95 | |
| 38x7 | 10.95 | 3.95 | |
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| Size Tires | Tubes | Size Tires | Tubes |
|---|---|---|---|
| 6.00-20 | $3.75 | $1.65 | |
| 6.50-20 | 4.45 | 1.95 | |
| 7.00-20 | 3.95 | 2.95 | |
| 7.50-20 | $6.95 | $2.75 | |
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near that gun. That's right, all the way over on the other side of the bed." He grinned. "Now, you ain't so dangerous."

Lister had taken off the gag. The girl turned her wide eyes to Marty. "My father!" she said throatily. "He's—dead?"

Marty nodded grimly. "I'm sorry, Miss Schaeffer. I did the best I could. I got one of his murderers. The other one was either our friend Lister, here, or maybe Mr. Marvin Dwyer himself. I'll get them both for you—before the day is over."

The girl closed her eyes for a moment, and gulped. Then she opened them bravely, forced herself to talk. "About that deed—" her eyes indicated the document on the telephone table— "I'll never sign it. I guess I'm not too dumb to realize that they'll never let you or me live, after what we know about them. They—they didn't have to kill—dad. The deed is in my name. Dad bought the property in my name because he didn't want to have anything to do with the money. He was going to excavate, and if he recovered the loot, he was going to turn it in to the insurance company for just enough of the reward to pay for the expense of excavating. Then he was going to build an apartment-hotel on the land. Dad—has enough money. He—didn't need the reward. He—just wanted my uncle Arty's name to be clear with society."

Dwyer sneered. "That's too bad, Miss Schaeffer, because we're going to have that property. You're going to sign the deed. Understand?"

Her eyes flashed. "And then be thrown in the bay with a hundred-pound rock around my neck? I heard you and Lister talking about it when you thought I'd fainted! I won't sign!"

"You'll sign—" Dwyer leered— "if your feet get boiled a little more. Nobody can take that treatment for long!"

"No!"

Dwyer motioned to Lister, who knelt at the bedside, seized her left foot, and raised the pitcher, to pour some of the boiling water on it.

Dwyer said: "Take the pitcher in the bath room. I just got the electric heater

going. You can boil up some fresh water. That's kind of cooled down a little."

Lister grinned, got up.

Marty said quickly: "Wait a minute. Miss Schaeffer, I think you ought to sign this deed. You take my advice—and sign it!" He moved over toward the telephone, upon which the deed lay, under the revolver he had put there.

Dwyer snarled: "Get away from there!" He had backed off, and was standing astraddle the man whom Marty had knocked out, and who lay near the door. Marty shrugged. "All right, get the paper yourself, if you're scary."

Dwyer edged around suspiciously, put the service revolver in his pocket, picked up the deed, and handed it to Marty. He said with a faint sneer: "If you want to talk her into signing, it's okay by me. I need a good, reputable witness. I could cut you in."

Marty said: "You sap, I'm doing this to save our lives!" He saw Dwyer's lids lower over his eyes and he knew that Dwyer was thinking him a sap, because what the girl had said was true. Dwyer would never allow them to leave the hotel alive. Marty took the deed, went and stood in front of the girl. His back was turned to Dwyer, and to Lister, who was just coming in with a pitcher of steaming-hot water.

"Miss Schaeffer," he said, "you should take my advice—sign this." He allowed his right eye to close in a significant wink, and the girl caught the signal, began to breathe fast. He went on: "You won't gain anything by holding out, except to get your feet badly burned. Now, if Dwyer will promise to let us leave here, we'll promise to keep quiet about this whole thing."

"Sure, I'll promise," Dwyer said eagerly. "You give me your word that you won't blab—both of you—and I'll let you walk out of here."

Marty still kept his back to Dwyer, but his ear caught the note of wonder in Dwyer's voice at the fact that Marty Quade, whose name carried plenty of weight in New York, should have become such a sap. He repeated his wink

Illustration

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to the girl, and said: "Certainly Miss Schaeffer. It's the only thing to do. Will you sign?"

The girl was a good actress. She sighed, said: "I'm afraid I couldn't stand any more of that hot water. I'll—sign."

Marty said over his shoulder: "Untie her hands."

DWYER came around behind her, kept Marty covered steadily while he fumbled at her bonds with his free hand. He was plainly suspicious, and Marty could see that he thought this too good to be true. However, Dwyer could hardly see anything wrong with the girl's offer to sign the deed. He got her hands free, and Marty, giving her the deed, was conscious of Lister standing behind him. He moved around a little, so that he could get a view of both Dwyer and Lister.

The girl took the deed, waited, and Marty said: "Here—you want a pen, don't you." With the greatest of natural ease, his hand slid into his jacket pocket. "Here—" His hand closed over the automatic he had taken away from the man at the door. His thumb slipped off the safety catch, and he fired through his pocket at Dwyer, who didn't know what hit him. Dwyer collapsed on the bed, with a hole in his forehead.

Lister uttered an alarmed shout, but before he could pull the trigger of his gun, the girl had sprung into action. She seemed to have read Marty's thoughts. She dived off the bed against Lister's legs, and the tall man was knocked backward momentarily, his aim spoiled. His slug went high, and Marty shot him through the heart.

"That," he said coldly, "is for old man Schaeffer."

The girl looked up at him from the floor. A wan smile illuminated her features, and she said: "Daddy! I hope you saw it!" Then she fainted.

Marty murmured: "Good kid . . . ."

He became conscious that some one was knocking at the door. The force of the blows increased. A bull voice called: "You want us to shoot this down?"

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Marty laughed. "Don't shoot, sergeant, at this old gray head!"

He opened the door, and Sergeant Green, with a dozen Miami police, burst into the room. Green aimed a blow at Marty, shouting: "There's the guy who took my gun!" But Marty ducked, came up behind a grizzled man, in plain clothes, whom he knew well. It was Captain Slocum of Miami Homicide.

Slocum said to Green sternly: "Remember, Green, you're only here by courtesy. You belong on the other side of Biscayne Bay. Behave yourself. I've known Quade for a long time. If he took your gun, you must have been naughty."

Green glowered, stepped among the bodies on the floor, disregarded the fainting girl, and picked up the deed, which she had not yet signed. "What's this?" he growled.

"That," Marty said brightly, "is worth one hundred thousand dollars."

"What?"

"Did you ever hear of buried treasure?"

"You nuts?"

"That's where Schaeffer's loot from the Boca Raton robbery, of three years ago, is hidden. The reward, my good sergeant, is one hundred grand. There—" he indicated the bodies of Dwyer and Lister— "are the birds who killed Schaeffer. Miss Schaeffer here will testify that they admitted it before we started the fireworks. If you're a good boy, sergeant, and if you apologize for the rough way you talked to me, I may buy you a nice cigar out of my reward money."

"Well," said Sergeant Green, "I'll be sunk—to the bottom of Biscayne Bay!"

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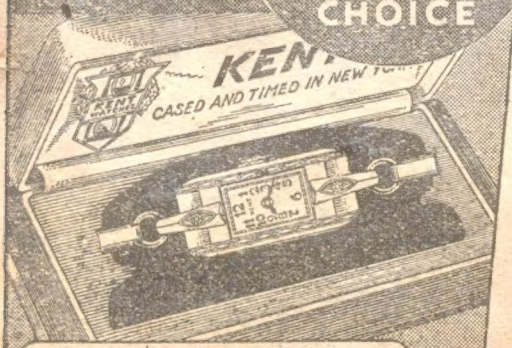


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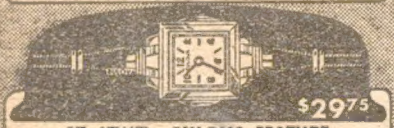

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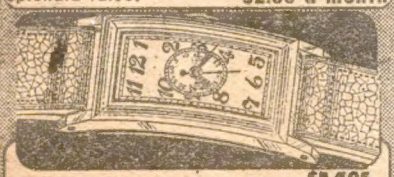

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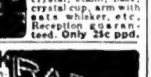


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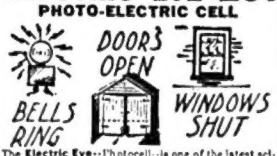


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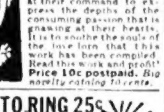

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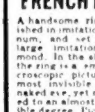


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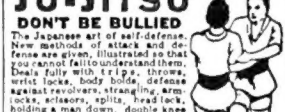

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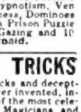

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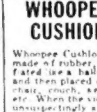

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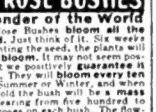


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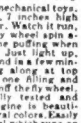

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